

PRAGUE SPRING WARSAW PACT INVASION, 1968

PHIL CARRADICE



Pen & Sword
MILITARY

AN IMPRINT OF PEN & SWORD BOOKS LTD.
YORKSHIRE - PHILADELPHIA

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by
PEN AND SWORD MILITARY
an imprint of
Pen and Sword Books Ltd
47 Church Street
Barnsley
South Yorkshire S70 2AS

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ISBN 978 1 52675 700 5
eISBN 978 1 52675 701 2
Mobi ISBN 978 1 52675 702 9

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CONTENTS

Introduction

1. End of the Summer of Love
2. In the Beginning
3. Dubcek
4. Coming of the Spring
5. Dissolving the Dream
6. Last Days of Summer
7. Invasion!
8. In View of the World
9. The Moscow Diktat
10. Jan Palach, the Ultimate Protest
11. A Prague Winter
12. Those Were the Days

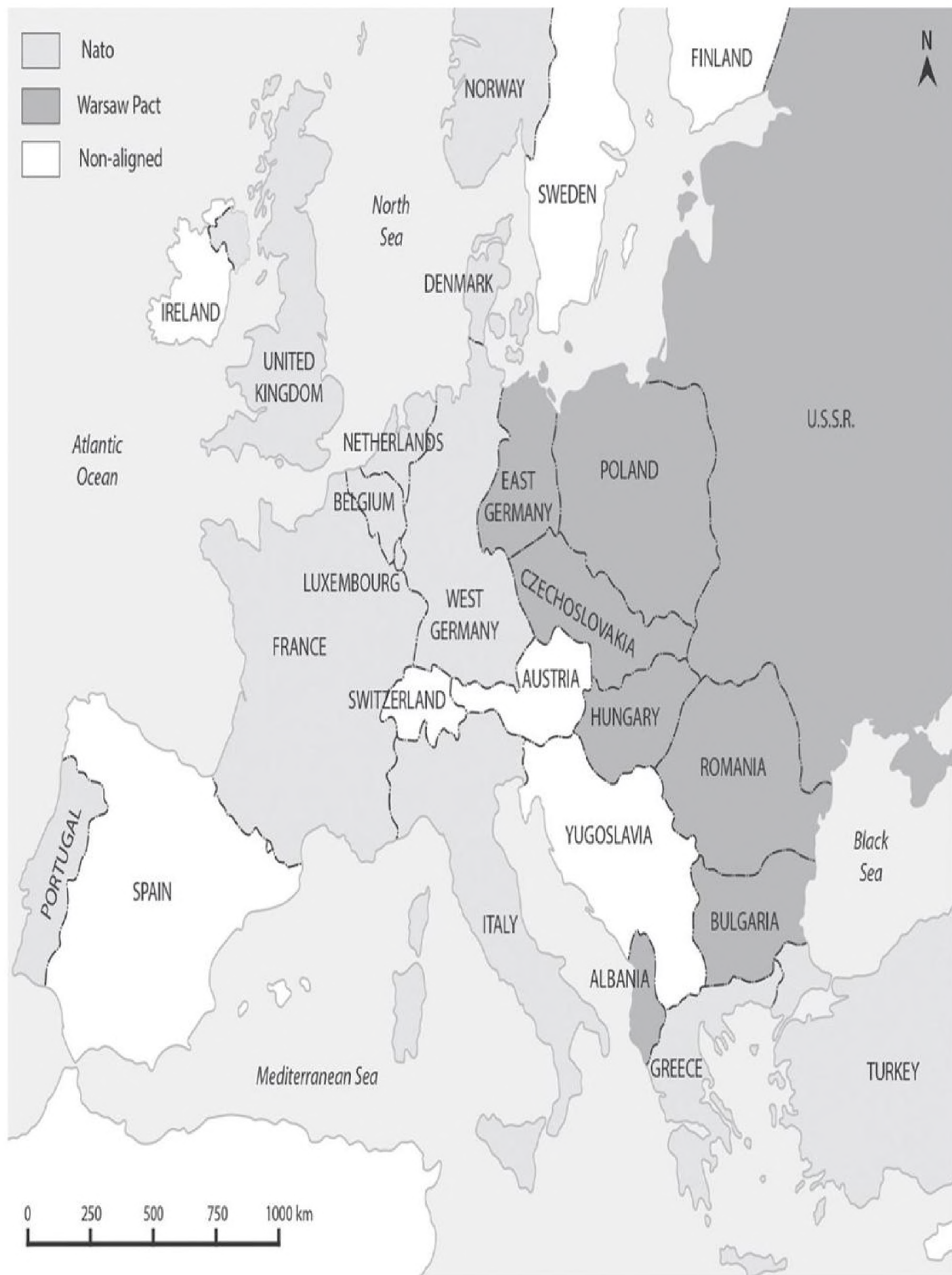
Conclusion

Bibliography

Acknowledgements



Czechoslovakia



Warsaw Pact

INTRODUCTION

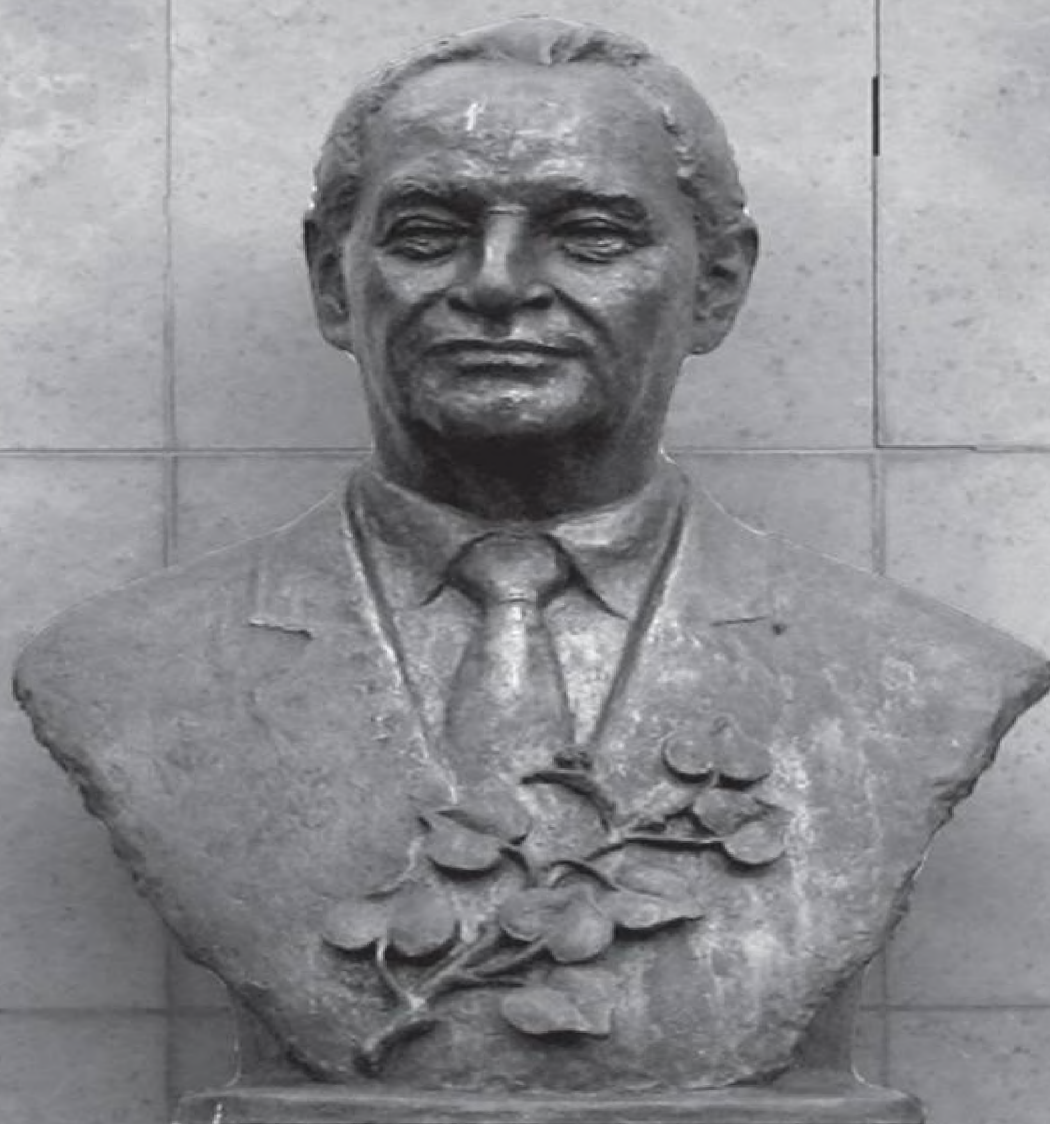
The Prague Spring of 1968 was one of the great people-induced movements of the twentieth century. It was not just a local phenomenon, confined simply to Czechoslovakia: millions of people across the world were influenced by what was going on in Prague. Even from a distance they could see and rejoice in an oppressed people finally discovering a toehold on the island of democracy.

The crushing of that democracy, that freedom, followed as surely as summer follows spring. And it was equally as significant. The Prague Spring made a huge impact in Czechoslovakia and in the world but the Soviet invasion—there is no other way to describe it—brought a degree of realism to a people who had basked a little too easily in the golden glow of a make-believe innocence.

The Soviet tanks brought that world to a sudden and violent halt. Reality hit home with a brutal power that surprised everyone. There were no exceptions or allowances to be made. After August 1968 the rule was simple: obey or suffer the consequences.

Thousands of men and women, most of them under the age of 25, flocked to the streets of Prague to protest against Soviet oppression. They shouted and chanted, they fought and hurled rocks, they set fire to tanks and armoured cars. Many died trying to make their protest. Having tasted the Prague Spring and then lost it, the people of Czechoslovakia were clear about their objectives: they wanted it back.

The Prague Spring may well have been a movement of the people, a more intense version of the hippie culture that had recently swept America, but it would still not have happened without the influence of one man, Alexander Dubcek. It is impossible, now, to look at the Czechoslovakian events of 1968 without the figure of Dubcek striding into view.



ALEXANDER DUBČEK
SLOVENSKÝ ŠTÁTNÍK
1921 – 1992

A bronze bust of Alexandra Dubcek, by sculptor Ludmila Cvengrosova. (Peter Zelizňák)



Soviet troops in Budapest, 1945. It would be some forty-five years before they left. (Fortepan)

Dubcek was a colossus, a mighty figure on the world stage, a man of vision and belief. He was courageous and dedicated and no account of the Prague Spring and its consequences would be complete without looking at his successes, and his failures. It is impossible to separate him from the events of that year—and of the ones that followed when he lost power but never lost or forgot his ability to hope.

Dubcek and the Prague Spring are, ultimately, one and the same thing. So while it is right to acknowledge the bravery of those who joined the demonstrations and the protest marches or the sheer dedication of men like Jan Palach who made the ultimate sacrifice, the courage of Alexander Dubcek should never be forgotten.

When one man refuses to bow down and surrender to the advances of a bully it is a moment to be savoured. We would all hope for the same degree of courage but fear and doubt must inevitably take their toll. Alexander Dubcek did not fear and he did not doubt, not even for a moment.

1. END OF THE SUMMER OF LOVE

It was January 1968 and the winds of change were already blowing. Gone was the previous year: 1967 with its magical summer of love was no more. That was the past, a period consigned to memory along with the ashes of New Year's Eve and the faint concern that maybe the future might not be so remarkable or as bright as everyone imagined.

In the minds of many, the previous twelve months had been memorable although, even now, there still remains the disturbing old adage that if people can remember the happenings of the year, really remember them, then they weren't actually there. Perhaps that is true. Most people weren't there—wherever 'there' might be.

When viewed dispassionately, the year 1967 had been little more than an extension to the phenomenal eruption of what was immediately classed as the 'hippie culture'. It was a period of flared jeans, tie-dyed T-shirts, peace and love for all. For many observers the lasting image of the year was of a protesting student placing a flower into the muzzle of a rifle belonging to one of America's National Guard. It was a time when, for the young at least, it seemed as if the world was changing for ever.

In reality, that change was limited in scope and location. Everyone believed they could be a part of the cultural and social revolution that appeared to be engulfing the whole world—even if they ventured no further than the local coffee bar or the church hop on a Saturday night—but it was a false dogma that empowered only the bare minimum of people.

Memory says it was a time of free love, free expression and free dreams. That, certainly, was what the media fed to the thousands of credulous young adults who waited, in awe, for the latest Rolling Stones or Byrds record and tried to follow George Harrison's finger movements on the fret board of his sitar. Everybody could be a part of it, the papers and magazines screamed at you, as long as you had the courage to seize your chance when it appeared.

It was actually all a wonderful deception. The summer of love was, in reality, confined to the Height-Ashbury district of San Francisco and while in many parts of the world there were those who tried to emulate the bare-footed, bare breasted antics of the

‘in crowd’, for most people 1967 had been no more than just another year. Jobs, education, settled relationships were the lot of most citizens. The summer of love was simply something to read about in the newspapers or watch on TV.

And yet—and yet! In hindsight the end of 1967 and the coming of 1968 do seem to signify an epoch that was like no other. Despite the niggling doubts, there was hope for the future, brittle and shallow as it might have been. The expectations of everyone, young and old alike were high; it was the coming of the Age of Aquarius.



Joan Baez and Bob Dylan perform at a Civil Rights march, Washington DC, 28 August 1963. (Rowland Scherman / NARA)

To some extent the two years, 1967 and 1968, run together and cannot be viewed apart. There are those who might remember 1967 for what it is supposed to represent, all the love-ins and Scott McKenzie's dirge—some might say generational anthem—about wearing flowers in your hair. However, in reality that year was simply a period of preparation. Just as the ministry of John the Baptist prepared people for the man who was destined to follow him, the summer of love and the whole concept of 1967 were not ends in themselves. They were more, much more than a shallow, self-indulgent early version of a student gap year: they were the foundations of greater things to come. And when viewed like that it was 1968, not 1967, that was the year that really changed the world.

At the time nobody knew what was about to happen. Only in hindsight can we see the significance of the period and the end of a culture—or the idea of a culture—far more dramatically than the Manson killings of 1970 which have always been taken as the end of flower power and the murder of a youthful dream.

When you look at the two years the key word to consider is 'dream'. The coming of 1968 saw the end of so many of the dreams that had been laid the previous year—among others, dreams of fame, universal toleration, liberty and the brave new world that had been prophesized since the end of the Second World War.



Looking back over the fifty years to those heady, high-flying days the setting or mapping-out of dreams seems to have come right from the top. On 1 January the United Nations, grand and imperious as ever, made what now seems to be the hollow announcement that 1968 was going to be 'The International Year for Human Rights'.*

Instead it was the year when American involvement in Vietnam escalated, when the lives of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King were cut short by crazed gunmen. It was the year of student protests and sit-ins when the Soviets smashed down with its clammy hands and vice-like grip on the shaky beginnings of spiritual awakening and independent thought within the Eastern Bloc.

It was the year of the Prague Spring, when for a few brief months the world really did seem to be relaxing its boundaries and changing. As we now know it was a false dawn. Significantly it was the year when power succeeded passion in the lands beyond the Iron Curtain and the Communist regime of the USSR crushed the life out of a burgeoning free spirit.

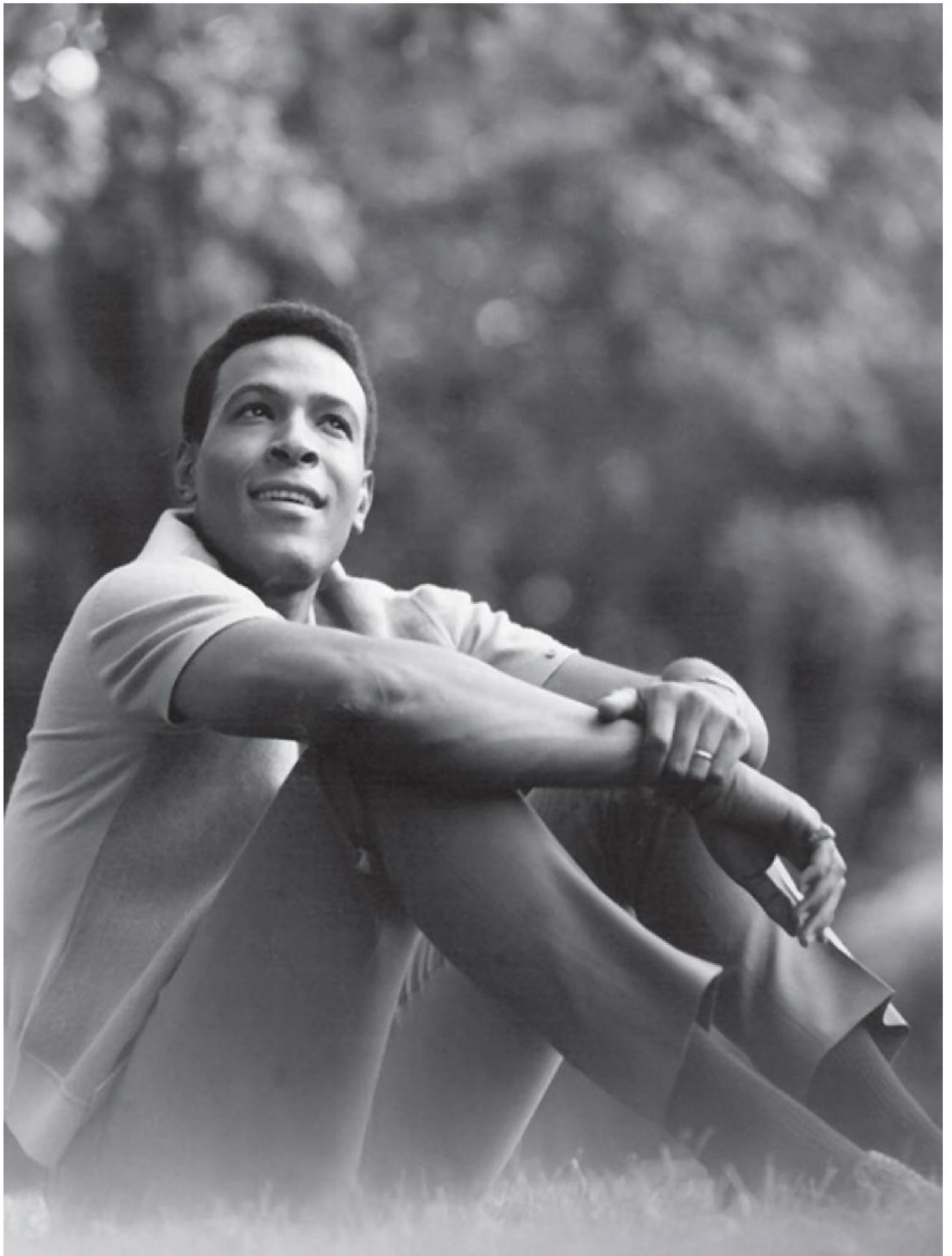
Those dramatic twelve months were undoubtedly an age of innocence, perhaps the last of them. After 1968 dreams gave way to the gun and the cosh, to napalm and police brutality. And in Czechoslovakia it was another twenty years before the freedoms of the West, along with the reforms that Alexander Dubcek had been able to only hint at, finally became reality.

1968 was a year of cultural significance that now seems to match perfectly with the mood of the times. Plays, poetry, novels and, in particular, modern popular music caught the attitudes and feelings of the youth of the day. Back then the songs that they sang and listened to were significant. Now they imbue the year with an air of atmospheric and haunting sadness. They seem to represent the lost dreams of a whole generation.

The year began propitiously enough with the Beatles' 'Hello Goodbye' being the best-selling record over the Christmas and New Year period. The title and lyrics were appropriate for what was to come although neither John Lennon nor Paul McCartney would have been aware, when they wrote the song, that they were welcoming in a year of such promise and yet such repression.

The song that summed up 1968, 'I Heard It Through the Grapevine', had actually been recorded the year before and had been a huge success for Gladys Knight and the Pips. However, it was the soulful Marvin Gaye version that caught the public imagination and the mood of the times. Released on 26 August 1968, it forced itself into the awareness of people across the globe at almost the exact moment that Soviet tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia. Ostensibly 'I Heard It Through the Grapevine' was a song about a man

who fears his girl is cheating on him. At the time, however, it was almost universally assumed that the lyrics were a metaphor for issues that were far more profound and challenging than that. What the song seemed to be saying was “Something is coming—and it’s not going to be good.” In all the bars, on all the radio stations, in the dance halls and on the streets of every city across the globe, in that heavy late summer atmosphere the song was constantly playing so that now it is impossible to separate ‘Grapevine’ from the world happenings of 1968.



Marvin Gaye, in 1966. (J. Edward Bailey)



POZOR!
STÁTNÍ HRANICE

There were other tunes or youth anthems that also seemed to sum up the period. Mary Hopkins's 'Those Were the Days' was suitably elegiac and coming as it did in the autumn of the year seemed to underline the end of an era. Also that autumn José Feliciano re-recorded the Doors' classic 'Light my Fire'. his pure, melodic voice catching the innocence, the hope and the belief that were still around—although disappearing by the day—that something worthwhile might yet be salvaged from the shell of the year.

Bob Dylan was still there, of course, suddenly restored to integrity after his brief flirtation with electric guitars and rock. 'The Times They Are a'Changin'' had been released three years previously in 1965 but now it was suddenly back in vogue as an anthem of the times. It was the same with Pete Seeger and his seminal composition. 'We Shall Overcome'. Most young protesters had not been around for the original release of Seeger's song but now they took it and sang it as a profound message.

Joan Baez—previously known by many only as the girl on the cover of a Bob Dylan album—was once more in demand. Her recordings, in particular her version of the Phil Ochs song, 'There But for Fortune', meant that her voice and interpretations were able to catch suddenly—and sometimes without understanding—at the heartstrings:

*Show me the country where the bombs had to fall,
Show me the ruins of the buildings once so tall
And I'll show you a young man with so many reasons why
There but for fortune go you and I, you and I.**

How better to describe the disappointments and dangers of the modern world, particularly once the Soviet Union had decided that enough was enough and sent the troops and the tanks into a virtually defenceless Czechoslovakia.

That October Jimi Hendrix burst onto the popular music scene, his songs and his performances symbolizing rebellion and protest. 'All Along the Watchtower' was, like Marvin Gaye's 'Grapevine', heard everywhere. It contrasted beautifully with Stevie Wonder's mood of optimism in 'For Once In My Life'. As autumn eased into winter the music of the youth seemed to be offering the idea that perhaps there was still hope for the future after all.

Wherever they were, whichever country they were in, young people were listening to the new anthems of their generation. The songs were profound and they slipped easily past the limitations that youth music had set itself.

Now, perhaps for the first time, that music, those lyrics, seemed to have a meaning and a purpose. Gone were the Cliff Richard, Pat Boone and Bobby Vee jingles and platitudes. Now the music actually meant something and nowhere was that more obvious than in the Eastern Bloc countries—perhaps Czechoslovakia in particular.

In Czechoslovakia, like most countries behind the Iron Curtain, American music and the whole American way of life had long been popular. It was in complete contrast to the Soviet-induced morbidity where everyone looked the same with their grey suits and bushy moustaches. Everyone, from politicians and apparatchiks to television presenters and radio hacks, even sounded the same.

Adherence to Communist Party ideals were expected to be rigidly followed. For most of the 1950s and 1960s that meant, of course, that any admission to liking American music and thoughts had to be an underground acceptance, out of the obvious notice of the authorities. At least that's how it was until the sudden and unexpected partial lifting of government restrictions in the mid-1960s.

There is a question to be asked, both for Czechoslovakia and for the rest of the world. Does popular culture reflect the times in which it flourishes—or are the times, the actions and beliefs of the age, formed by popular culture? It is, to an extent, a chicken-and-egg situation, an unanswerable dilemma but as a way of fielding an unanswerable question, the conclusion has to be a little of both.



‘I Heard It Through the Grapevine,’ ‘All Along the Watchtower,’ ‘We Shall Overcome’ and the rest of those evocative songs captured the feelings of the year. They also gave meaning to protest and symbolized the change that everyone hoped would soon come.

By the early part of 1968, Czechoslovakia had been ready and ripe for that change for some time. While the rank and file of the Communist Party in the country had slipped into what has been called “deep apathy and passivity”, the young people of Czechoslovakia were increasingly refusing to accept the one-party state where opinions that were contrary to central government were not valued or even quashed. Step out of line at your peril.*

By the mid-sixties the youth of the country were probably the best-educated section of Czechoslovak society. Along with that education middle-class values and a desire for quality jobs became vivid and real. Unfortunately, the regime had little or no understanding of how to solve the problem—arguably it had no idea the problem even existed: “In the decade after 1956 the numbers of trained lawyers, doctors, technicians, and engineers multiplied dramatically, but one in six of these new graduates had to take jobs below the level for which he or she was qualified.”†

Inevitably the regime’s failure to provide rewarding and liberating jobs for many of its young people led to disenchantment. What was needed was a way to express that unhappiness with and dislike of the status quo and with what many regarded as a betrayal by the very powers that should have been helping and encouraging.

The arts and perhaps most significantly music provided some relief. Between them they gave the youth of Czechoslovakia a way of expressing their unhappiness. They enabled young people to make a statement—and the statement was simply “We are not happy with what you are doing and the direction in which you’re leading us.”

Czechoslovakia, Prague in particular, had always maintained strong links with music. Concerts and performances of Mozart, Beethoven, and others were regular events and readily available for all levels or strata of society. Czech composers such as Dvorak and Mahler were much in demand. But these were classical events and at the risk of making too-sweeping a generalization, it was viewed as the music of the old, the music of conformity and was not what young people wanted.



Antonin Dvorak, Czech composer (1841–1904).

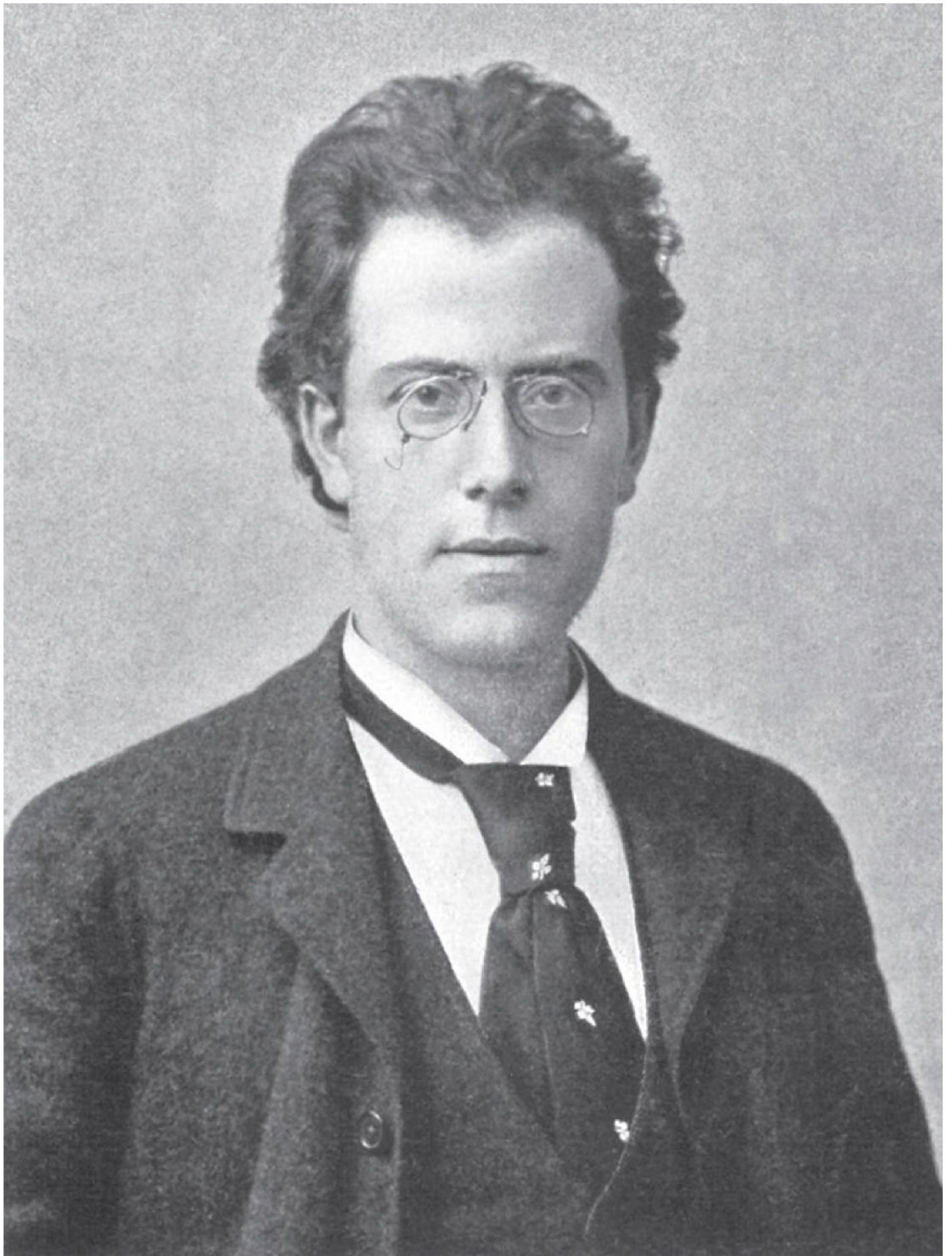
In the spring and summer of 1968 it was popular youth music that was in demand, popular youth music that dominated life in Prague and other centres of population. Inevitably, to begin with at least, young people turned to the music of the West. That was the centre of youth culture and so they embraced it. Almost by association, they took in all of the arts of the West as well.

And so they listened to Dylan and Marvin Gaye, to Joan Baez and the Beatles; they read George Orwell, Joseph Conrad and T. S. Elliot—when they could get them—and they went to the rare performances of plays by Vaclav Havel and other Czech writers. They were able at last to watch the films of Milos Forman, movies that had long been in demand in the West. Much of that cultural enjoyment was ‘below the radar’ but it enabled the young people of the country to lose themselves for a brief period in a world of vastly different standards.

Into this repressive and bland state there now stepped what was probably the most important politically minded rock band of the late twentieth century—The Plastic People of the Universe.

These young Czechs played a type of psychedelic garage music and were, in many respects, no different from many other groups of youngsters then living behind the Iron Curtain. They were lovers of all things western. Where they were different, however, was in their politics and their ability to use their music and songs as a vehicle to highlight the changes that the Soviet Bloc had striven for years to destroy.

Pulled together or created by bassist and singer Milan ‘Mejia’ Hlavsa in October 1968, barely a month after the Eastern Bloc tanks rolled across the border, the Plastic People of the Universe were vocal in the call for freedom. That was what their songs were all about—music, yes; but more importantly the message they were giving transcended the long hair, the beards and the hippie beads of their generation.



Gustav Mahler, Czech composer (1860–1911).

And the mood and the feelings were catching. Very quickly The Plastic People spawned dozens of similar garage bands across the country and in Prague in particular where the newly established music centres provided an ideal set of venues.

If popular music can be said to help formulate the attitudes and behaviours of a people then the Plastic People of the Universe, their name taken from a Frank Zappa and Mothers of Invention album, have to be at the forefront of the Czechoslovak ‘revolution’ of 1968.

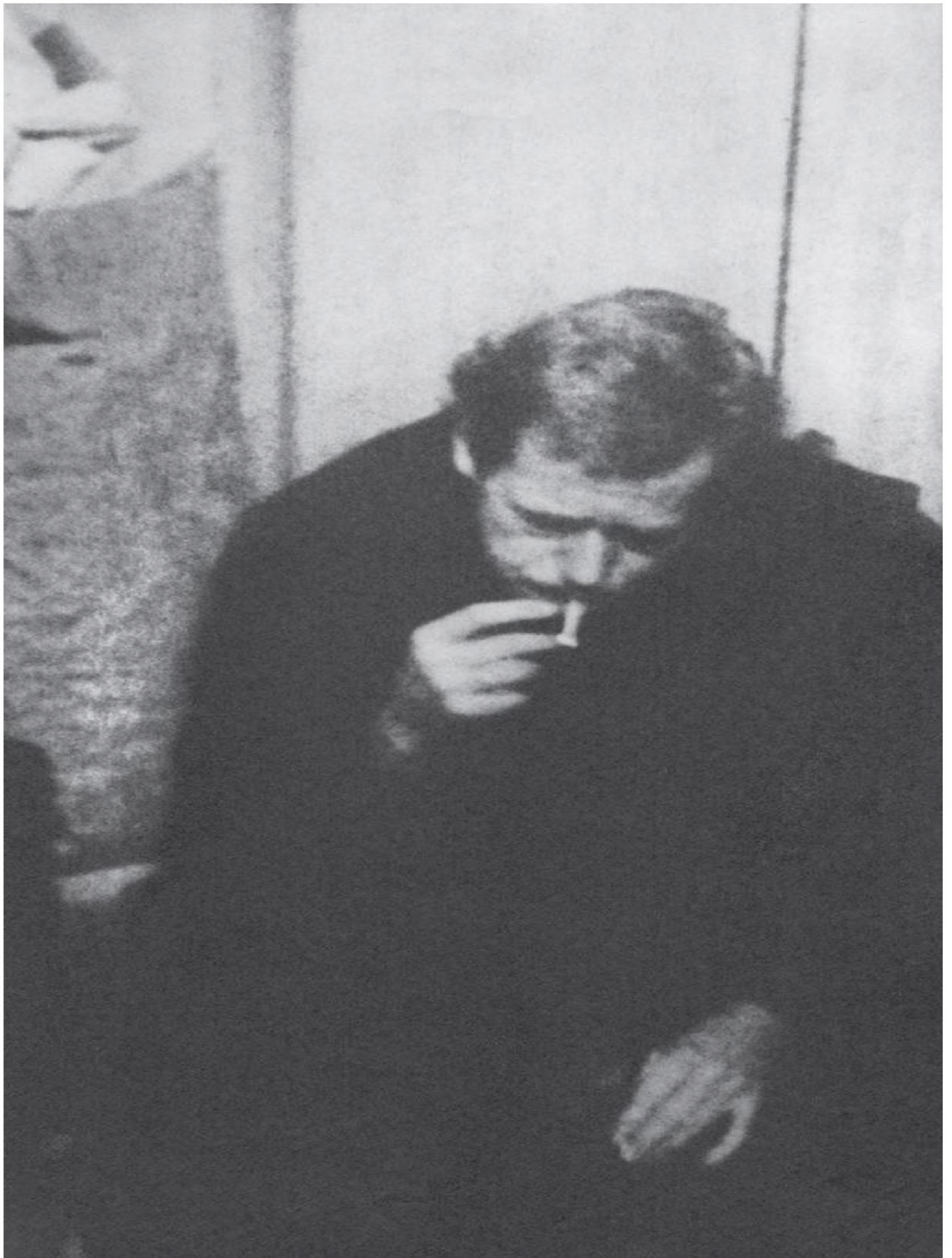
In the end the mood of repression that followed the crushing of the Prague Spring—normalization as the Soviets would have it—forced The Plastic People underground. Perhaps because of this repression, however, a whole cultural movement soon formed around the band.

Thousands flocked to hear them play, whether in concert and dance halls or, once their musicians licence was withdrawn by the Communist regime, in houses and barns out in the country. They even played in the barn next to the house where Vaclav Havel lived—and eventually died. In the beginning they performed mostly cover versions, in English, of western songs. That would, in time, change once the words and lyrics of poet Egon Bondy, his work being predictably banned by the authorities, came to mean something special to the band. Soon they were performing original songs, in Czech, and holding their audiences rapt in the collective palm of their hands.

Vaclav Havel, playwright and future president of Czechoslovakia, was aware of their value and influence. He met them and appeared on stage with them, commenting, “We’re never gonna get anywhere unless we put our butts on the line like these kids have.”*

Popular music, youth culture, revolution—they invariably go together. In 1968 they were central to the whole concept of the Prague Spring and to the dreams of a generation.

But before we can gain any real understanding of the Prague Spring, its origins and its effects, we need to go back and try to put the whole thing into context. How the situation in Czechoslovakia developed in the immediate post-war years is essential knowledge before the events of 1968 and beyond can be understood and appreciated.



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- * Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year that Rocked the World*, p. 14.
 - * Phil Ochs, 'There but for Fortune' on Joan Baez *Greatest Hits*.
 - * Kieran Williams, The Prague Spring and its Aftermath, p. 14.
 - † Ibid., p. 6.
 - * James Sullivan, article in *Rolling Stone*, 1976

2. IN THE BEGINNING

The modern-day Czech Republic, like the adjacent Slovak Republic, its former partner in the state of Czechoslovakia, lies at the very heart of Europe. For years it was an ideal and rewarding location for many entrepreneurs and businessmen, statesmen and soldiers, being set astride the various trade routes and therefore easily accessible from both west and east. Yet because of its position it was also a dangerous place to try to scratch out a living. Always something of a liability, the country was fought over many times, even decimated, in conflicts like the Thirty Years' War.

By the middle years of the nineteenth century the area had become an integral part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Despite the decaying Hapsburg regime, the final years of the nineteenth century seem, in hindsight, to be something of a golden period in Austrian life, a magnificent and splendid last kick of hedonism that masked the rotten core beneath the surface.

Vienna was still the glittering social centre of the world and Czechoslovakia, as an integral part of the dying Empire, was touched by that glory. Not only that, from a political point of view the country was an ideal buffer between Austria-Hungary and potential enemies like Germany and Russia to the north east.

Czechoslovakia had always been something of a 'made-up' country, consisting of small pockets of various nationalities that had functioned as independent kingdoms until the Hapsburg Empire gathered them in. The three main areas or elements were Bohemia in the west, Moravia in the centre and Slovakia in the east.

Nationalism in Czechoslovakia had been growing and developing since the early part of the nineteenth century, just as the huge but outdated Austro-Hungarian Empire began to decline in power and efficiency. At this time the Czech language was heavily promoted by Czech nationalists. It was accompanied by an intense and growing pride in their achievements, historical and modern, by the Czech people who seemed to have suddenly developed an awareness of their history and culture.

Those people came from a mix of ethnic backgrounds but, crucially, there was always a significant proportion of Germans and people of Germanic blood living in the country. In a population that fluctuated between 13 and 15 million, sometimes more, men, women

and children of Germanic birth invariably made up about a quarter of the total. There were also considerable numbers of Poles, Hungarians and Jews as well as large groupings of Czechs and Slovaks. It was, quite simply, a boiling pot of nationalities.

As would be expected, most Czechs fought for Austro-Hungary and the Central Powers in the First World War. Most but not all: members of the Czechoslovak Legion threw their weight behind the Allied cause. Their motives were obviously long term with a view to gaining independence from the old empire once the war had been won. They were not disappointed.



In the First World War, the Czechoslovak Legion fought for the Allies, despite being part of the Central Powers. Seen here is the 6th Rifle Regiment in 1917. (Alois Rocman / Frantisek Sladek)

At the end of the conflict that saw Germany and its allies humiliated and destroyed, the 1919 Treaty of Versailles tore up the map of Europe, creating new countries and radically altering the appearance and governance of several of the old ones. The Austro-Hungarian Empire disappeared, its Hapsburg rulers displaced and dismissed. The Empire, vast, inefficient and effectively ungovernable, was replaced by the small republics of Austria and Hungary and by the totally new countries of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

The ancient country of Poland, long swallowed up by Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary, was recreated and, through the Polish Corridor, given access to the sea. Out of the Tsarist Empire of Russia—never forgiven for making a separate peace with Germany in 1918—the four new states of Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were also created. In the Balkans, previously Austro-Hungarian, territories were given full independence through newly created states such as Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Serbia.

By the terms of the Treaty of Versailles large parts of Germany were transferred to Czechoslovakia and Poland, over seven million Germans suddenly coming under a different set of rulers and governors. It was something that was deeply resented in Germany, just as people in the newly formed and independent nations of Austria and Hungary were unhappy by the sudden removal of economic and political unity that the old empire had symbolized.

The aim of these ruthless and radical changes was to solve the age-old problem of nationalism but, inevitably, they gave birth to far more difficulties than their creators could ever solve or even imagine. As the world quickly discovered, countries, new or old, require more than just a strong sense of identity and national unity. They need good and effective government and, crucially, a sound economic base.

The various parts of the old Hapsburg Empire, which had previously been mutually supportive, were now isolated from each other by economic, geographic and political divides. The intention of the Treaty of Versailles had been to enable countries like Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland to become self-governing. In theory it was an excellent concept. In reality it was never going to be that easy and it was not long before major difficulties began to arise within most of the newly created nations: “Their peoples were not accustomed to political power and did not know how to use it. Their countries contained different national groups, with different social and religious traditions. Above all, there was the great problem of communism which was growing in strength throughout Eastern Europe.”*

Imposition of what are arguably alien ideals onto foreign peoples is never an easy process. The changes of 1919 were more than ideological; however, this was not just the imposing of new ideas and values; this was the formation of new countries after very limited, if any, consultation. And, of course, it was a disaster.

Initially set up as democratic replicas of the western states, the idea of creating “safe environments” by designing nations established in the victors own image was both naïve and foolish. The post-Versailles, pseudo-western governments in the newly created republics began to evaporate almost before the ink was dry on the treaty document.

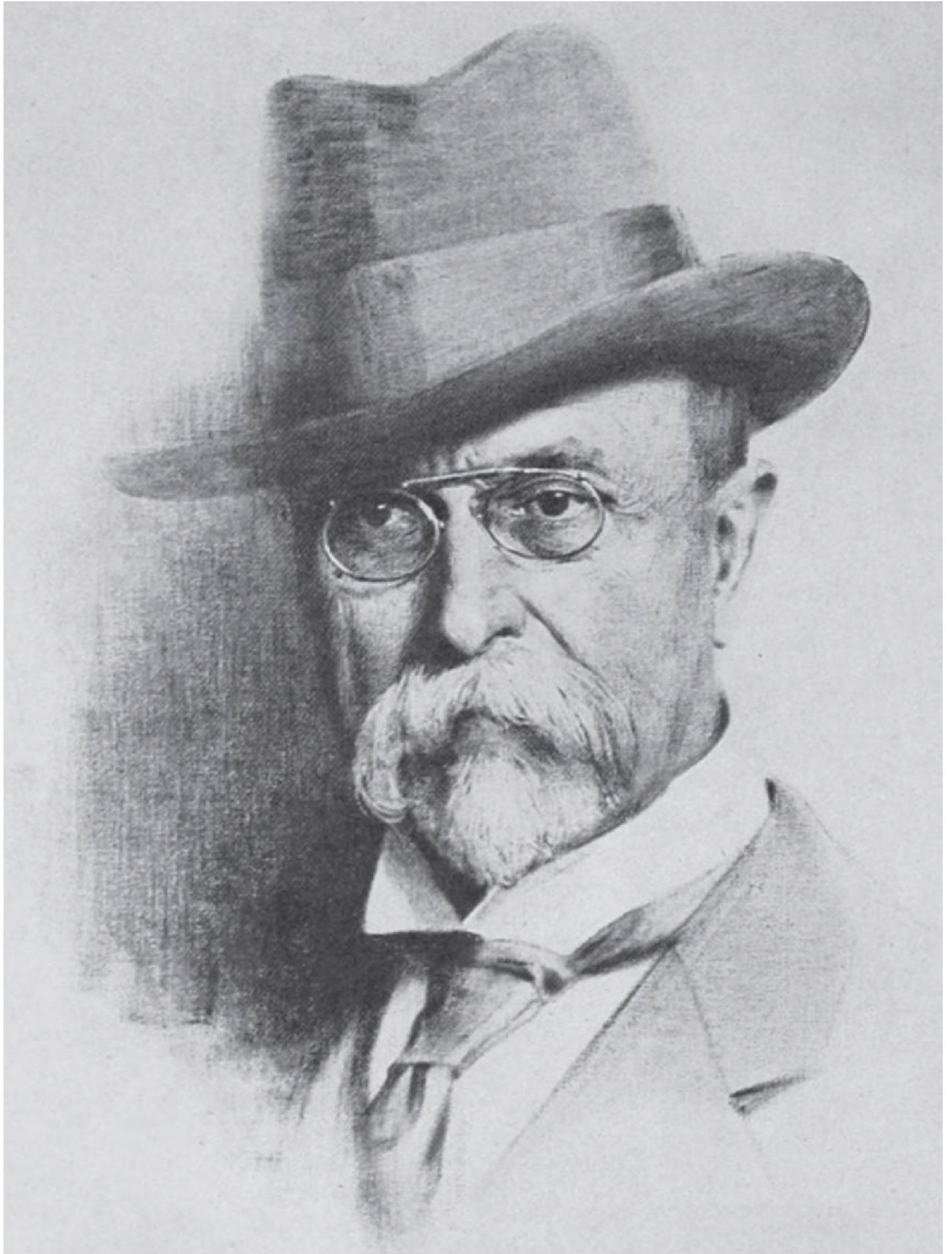
In Poland an army dictatorship was established after the first democratically elected president was assassinated within ten days of assuming office. The democratic constitution of Hungary lasted barely six months before it was overthrown in a communist coup. In the resultant civil war both communism and liberalism were destroyed and Admiral Horthy seized power. Hungary was, as some wit once remarked “a kingdom without a king, ruled by an admiral without a fleet!” It was the same in the Balkans where the rulers of the newly created countries were soon exposed as corrupt, self-interested and ruthless.

The one new country that did seem to have some sort of hold over its policies was Czechoslovakia. This was undoubtedly due to the wise leadership of Tomas Masaryk, the first president of the new nation, and to his eventual successor, Eduard Benes. They were moderate in their approach and were able to create a liberal government that, at first glance, seemed to offer everything that the makers of the Treaty of Versailles had wanted.

Czechoslovakia’s first parliamentary elections, held in 1920, saw the Social Democratic Party returned with over 25 percent of the vote, making it the strongest and most powerful political unit in the country. At that stage the Social Democrats, in seeming unity for once, consisted of all of the Czech socialists. It was, of course, too good to last.

Alexander Dubcek was later to write what was effectively an obituary for the newly created Czechoslovakia and its seemingly ideal government. He may have been writing out of bitterness or from a Slovak rather than a Czech position but there is no denying the power of his words: “Dreams rarely match reality. They tend rather to the ominous or the optimistic.”*

Despite the moderation and sensibilities of Masaryk and Benes, the new nation of Czechoslovakia, in all of its policies and edicts, invariably preached Czech unity, Czech history and Czech plans for the future. But there were other national groupings in the country, notably the Slovaks, and their desire for cultural and political independence remained strong.



A 1919 portrait of Tomas Garrigue Masaryk, first president of Czechoslovakia.

In the nineteenth century there had been an industrial revolution in Czechoslovakia, in line with the developments that had taken place in most European nations, but this rapid industrial growth was confined to Bohemia and Moravia. By contrast, Slovakia remained solidly backward and agricultural and the people of the region were resentful of their wealthy neighbours.

They did, however, retain their pride in being Slovakian. While many were illiterate and most remained peasants, the people of the region were very conscious of the fact that they had been left behind in the grab for better living conditions. And they were quite happy to make their feelings and opinions known.

For a while there was even a demand from the Slovaks that the new nation should be called Czecho-Slovak rather than Czechoslovakia, thus recognizing their statehood and their desire to be seen as an independent people. The demand was rejected by the Czechs and to many forward thinking people it appeared there was serious trouble ahead.[†]

Tomas Masaryk resigned in 1935. His health had been poor, and he died three years later. Eduard Benes took over his duties and Masaryk's son, Jan, soon followed his father into politics. It was not easy but they did manage to maintain order in what was always a dangerous and troubled time.

Matters were forestalled or overtaken during what the poet W. H. Auden called "the low dishonest decade" of the 1930s. By the terms of the Munich Agreement of 1938 the largely German-speaking Sudetenland—two-fifths of Czech territory—was ceded to Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany. With the Sudetenland went virtually all of the defences of the country and, more significantly perhaps, other envious eyes saw the opportunity to make their own 'land grabs'.



Poland immediately seized part of Moravia while Hungary reclaimed what it considered as its traditional rights to—and ownership of—large swathes of Slovakia. In the coming year Hitler swallowed up the rump of Czechoslovakia with little or no protest from western powers.

The country, under Nazi domination, was split into the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and the vassal state of the Serbian Republic. Playing on the Slovak desire for recognition the Nazis effectively made Slovakia an accomplice in their murderous regime that eventually saw almost 60,000 Slovak Jews sent to the death camps. Czech leaders fled the country, establishing a government-in-exile in Britain.*

At the end of the war in 1945 Czechoslovakia was ‘liberated’ by the troops of the Red Army. Although the country was now behind what Winston Churchill had termed the Iron Curtain, the government-in-exile under President Eduard Benes returned and attempted to pick up the pieces.

However, in 1946 Czechoslovakia became the only European nation to come under communist rule following a democratic election and vote. Already backed by the Soviet Union the Czech communists had promised that if they were voted into power, there would be no collectives, as in Russia and other Eastern Bloc countries, and that small businesses would be recognized and allowed to continue. The communists duly won the election but of course their promises were soon exposed as shallow and worthless.

By 1948 the Czech Communist Party had established almost complete control over the country. The two men who might have provided at least a degree of opposition to the communist steamroller were taken out of the picture very early on. President Benes, never well since his encounters with Hitler in 1938, had died in June that year and Jan Masaryk, the son of Czechoslovakia’s first president, Tomas Masaryk, and himself the first post-war foreign minister, had also perished. The death of Masaryk has always been shrouded in mystery. He had been foreign minister in the government-in-exile and, despite grave personal reservations, remained in post after the return and when the communists came to power. On the morning of 10 March 1948 his body, dressed only in pyjamas, was found below his bathroom window in the courtyard of the foreign ministry. It was hardly a moment for humour but, even so, wits in the West soon took to calling it “the Third De-fenestration of Prague.” The official verdict was that Masaryk had committed suicide but a number of subsequent investigations indicate that he may well have been murdered by Moscow assassins. There has never been a firm resolution but as one commentator from the time noted: “Jan Masaryk was a very tidy man. He was such a tidy man that when he jumped he shut the window after himself.”*

With the demise of Benes and Masaryk went the last hope of democratic and open governance as Soviet influence on the men in power in Prague became increasingly obvious. It was done in the name of democracy—after all, this was what the people had voted for—but it was clear to watchers in the West that what they were witnessing was the creation of a dictatorial regime.

Reneging on their election promises, the communist government oversaw the process of farms being turned into state collectives and small businesses either closed down or brought under state control. It was a rigid and debilitating policy, creating what was effectively a police state under Antonin Novotny, the First Secretary of the Czech Communist Party.

From the beginning the links with the Soviet Union were clear. Czechoslovakia, like the other countries behind the Iron Curtain had become a Soviet satellite, its economic status formalized by membership from 1949 of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, COMECON as it was known. This organization—which included not only the Soviet satellites but also nations like Cuba and Mongolia, outside the Eastern Bloc—was Stalin's attempt to stimulate economic growth of states which had lost their traditional trading markets as a result of the Cold War.

If COMECON was an attempt to provide economic aid, then military and defence issues behind the Iron Curtain were supported by the Warsaw Pact Treaty, formalized in May 1955. Czechoslovakia was one of the original seven Eastern Bloc countries to sign.

Josef Stalin, the long-time Soviet dictator and demagogue, died suddenly and unexpectedly in 1953. After some initial inter-Kremlin bickering, jostling and murder, Nikita Khrushchev assumed control of the Soviet Union. Despite having been something of a partner to Stalin's excesses, Khrushchev—once he attained his position of power—began to adopt a more lenient approach to government in Russia and in the Eastern Bloc territories. It was contrary to his public persona in the West where he was seen as a loud-mouthed bully but Khrushchev was determined to do his best for the people under his control.

Over the next few years the satellite states saw a gradual but deliberate policy of de-Stalinization and a loosening of central control—except, that is, in Czechoslovakia where the draconian system continued unabated. For a country and a people who had prided themselves on their history and cultural background it was a devastating blow.



In addition to his post as First Secretary Antonin Novotny soon became president of Czechoslovakia, a one-man ruler who was backed up by dozens of secret police and networks of local informers. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s Novotny ensured that conditions in Czechoslovakia remained under his tight control. Soon he announced that due to his policies the process of socialization was now complete and the country renamed as the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.

At this stage changing the name of their country mattered little to the Czechoslovak people. While Novotny and his cronies enjoyed the privileges of rank and position, abusing their almost unchallengeable situation, the Czech people were denied access to the West, even to the other Soviet Bloc countries and to their people. Cultural stimulation was almost non-existent for many years, the dictatorship of Novotny and his Czech Communist Party being a dictatorship of deed and action but, more significantly, a dictatorship of the spirit.

If de-Stalinization had proceeded slowly in the other satellite states of the USSR, then progress in Czechoslovakia was the equivalent of an aged tortoise or a giant sloth taking their morning walk in the sun. That suited Novotny but it did little to help the Czechoslovak people who were isolated and unhappy behind the cloak of communism and socialist repression.

Novotny's misrule could not last for ever and by 1964 world events were beginning to impinge on the Czechoslovak socialist visions of utopia. Those visions had long ago ceased to be a dream and were now more of a nightmare. Nowhere was that more obvious than in the area of finance. Despite the existence of the COMECON, by the mid-1960s the Czech economy was in a parlous state. It had been struggling for years, in company with the financial structures of many of the other Eastern Bloc countries.

The situation in Czechoslovakia, by the nature of the country's situation and its hard-line approach had always been protected or masked but now Novotny's misrule was clear to all. There were food shortages everywhere, particularly in Slovakia, and the government had even taken the drastic step of announcing a "meatless Thursday" to be observed every week.

In Moscow things were also changing. In the wake of the debacle over the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, Khrushchev was perceived as a failed icon and within two years he had fallen. The degree of aid, militarily or otherwise, that Novotny could expect from the USSR was now limited.

As a result of the Moscow changes he decided that rather than leave himself out on a limb with little hope of support in the event of a crisis, he would have to ease up on the

severity of his dictatorial regime and its controls. What he forgot or simply did not realize was that in any rigid autocratic regime, a lifting or easing of restrictions, however small, generally leads to people only wanting more. Once freedom has been achieved it is very difficult to refasten the shackles.

The easing of restrictions came suddenly, almost without warning. Practically overnight there was a relaxation of censorship, thus allowing artists and writers a great deal more freedom of expression. The writers and poets of Czechoslovakia, literary descendants of Franz Kafka and Jaroslav Hasek who were now finally able to say what they wanted to say, gratefully accepted the 'gift' from Novotny.

Government restrictions were still there, of course, and freedom of speech was actually a relative term. While writers were being encouraged to express themselves more openly the literary magazine *Tvar* was shut down, for example. Despite the sudden freedom, limits were still set on what could actually be written or said.



When the beat poet Allen Ginsberg, complete with long hair, mystic Eastern Buddhist symbols and declarations of free love, came to Prague he was welcomed by the young and, for a while at least, tolerated by the regime. He was even crowned King of the May, an old Czech tradition, an event that the beatnik poet took easily in his stride.

Eventually Ginsberg's eccentricities proved too much for Novotny and, much to the poet's secret delight at something that only increased his mystique and reputation, he was deported from the country.*

Freedom of expression was only one aspect of the new intellectual openness, the ending of isolation was even more important. To the utter joy of many people the regime now announced that it would allow some limited degree of travel to the West and to the other Eastern Bloc countries.

It seems, now, to be such a simple privilege, that ability to get up and go wherever you wish. But in Czechoslovakia, even after the easing of Novotny's restrictions, it remained a rare privilege.

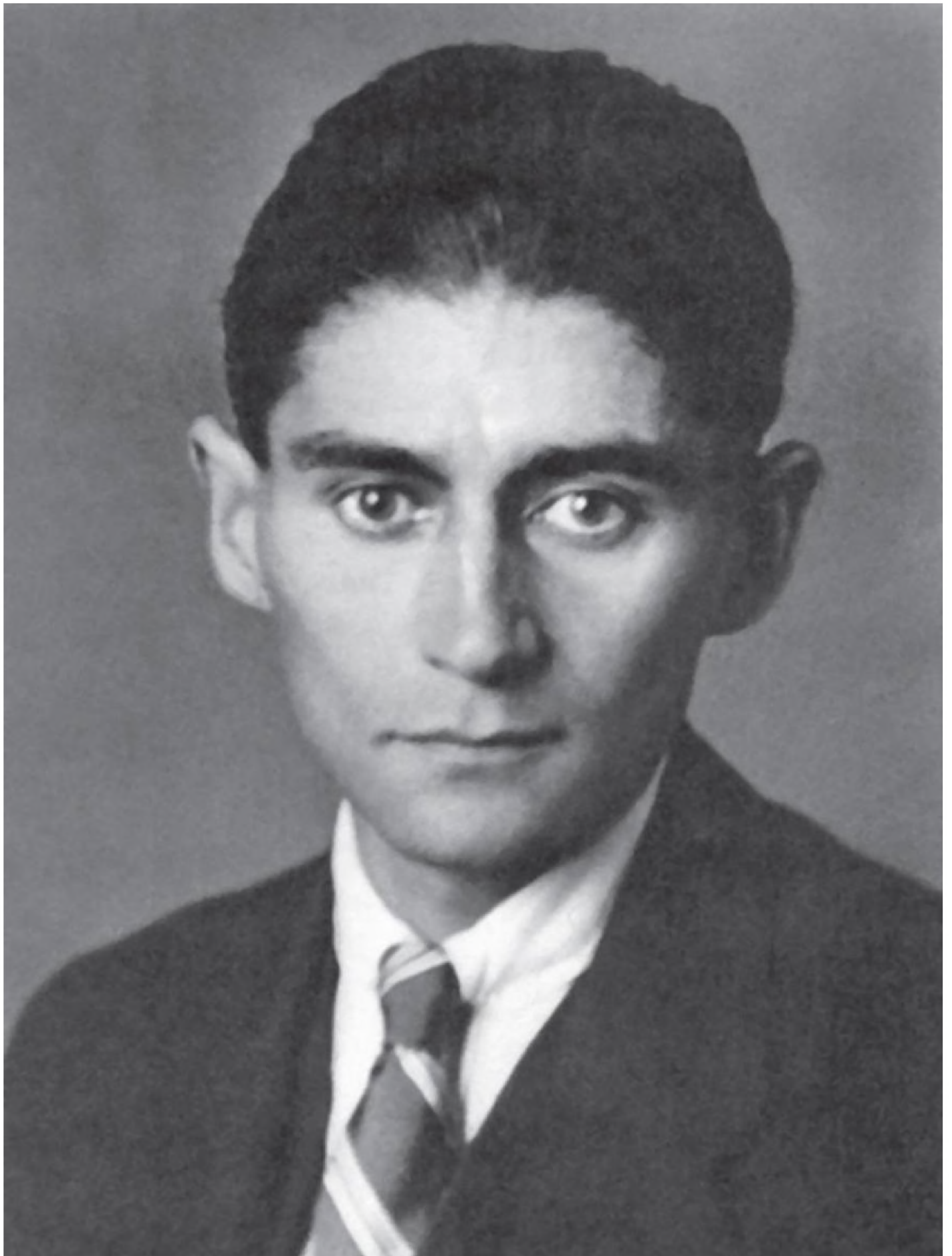
Simon Mawer in his recent novel *Prague Spring* catches the mood perfectly. The two main protagonists are given a lift to the Austrian-Czech border by an American soldier. There they pause to gaze at the barbed wire and the checkpoints:



Nikita Khrushchev at a meeting of the United Nations in New York during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

““So what’s it for?” He glances round at his audience as though looking for an answer. “Easy, really. It’s to keep their people in. If you’ll excuse ma French, lady, you’re looking into the biggest fucking prison camp the world has ever seen.””*

‘Prison camp’ or not, people were now being allowed into Czechoslovakia, as are Mawer’s characters in his book. Now that the countries of Europe—or even farther afield—were no longer totally cut off, the young people of Czechoslovakia grabbed the opportunity to fraternize with people they had always been told were reactionary and decadent.



The Czech writer Franz Kafka, in 1923.

And it was now that the young Czechoslovaks began to openly adopt the western values that had seemed so normal to the residents of the US and Britain. Books, bands, magazines and clothing—denim jeans in particular—were all now available. For people who had been denied such luxuries it was the beginning of a magical time.

The police, government officials and members of the communist party might have looked on with scorn but they did little to prevent what they saw as clear exhibitionism. The threat of revoking the new freedoms might still have been there, in the background, but it was for the moment at least just a threat.

American music which had previously been an underground experience could now be heard daily in the streets and on the radio. Television was still in its infancy but the radio was a hugely popular and instructive medium. Every home had its radio set and everyone listened to the broadcasts, limited and controlled as they might be. By some strange quirk of fate, international radio stations—even Radio Luxembourg with its constant diet of pop music and the rather more intellectual BBC World Service—that had always been distorted by interference and loud inane wailings, were suddenly available, loud and clear, for everyone to hear. It was a small thing but it was a freedom that the young eagerly seized upon.

In the atmosphere of relaxed central control, limited as it might be, a network of music clubs where jazz and rock could be heard, began to spring up and flourish in Prague. No visit to the city was complete without at least one evening in the heady, beer- and drug-induced atmosphere of a music club. Outside the clubs, during the day, there were buskers and folk singers and young people in beads and sandals, many sporting beards and long hair. No longer were such exotic creatures a rare sight on the streets of the city.

Travel was a two-way process. Not only could students and interested explorers now experience the delights of France, West Germany and other countries previously out of their reach but interested westerners could also see what an Iron Curtain country—perhaps the most repressive of all Iron Curtain countries—was really like.



Three decades earlier, almost to the day, on 3 October 1938, Czechoslovakia experienced another invasion, this one by Nazi Germany, in the Sudetenland. (Bundesarchiv)

Allen Ginsberg and the like were no longer rare arrivals as visitors flocked to Czechoslovakia, to Prague in particular. They brought with them all of the paraphernalia of youth culture that was so normal to them, and so exciting to the Czechoslovaks.

What was needed to make this sudden godsend both real and lasting was a political figure of integrity and charm. That figure was already there, except that no one had yet realized it. His name was Alexander Dubcek.

* M. N. Duffy, *The Twentieth Century*, p. 310.

* Alexander Dubcek, *Hope Dies Last*, p. 15

† Kurlansky, pp. 26-7.

* Dubcek, pp. 31-2.

* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Masaryk

* Kurlansky, pp. 31-2.

* Simon Mawer, *Prague Spring*, p. 193.

3. DUBCEK

Alexander Dubcek was born in Czechoslovakia to Slovak parents three years after the end of the First World War. He may have entered the world in a newly created country but he was a Slovak and would always remain a Slovak. He held many of the dreams of the Slovak people beating and aching in his heart. From the beginning he and his family, like many Slovaks, enjoyed a wandering life. They would move regularly from one place to another, taking in different countries and lifestyles where the young Dubcek picked up many of the ideas and experiences that would influence his later career.

His parents were from central Slovakia, from villages that lurked in the shadow of the White Carpathian Mountains. Both of them had endured poverty in their childhood but they did not actually meet until many years later. Dubcek's father, Stefan, was, from the outset, a talented and enterprising individual. In particular he was a man determined to better himself. In 1910 Stefan walked away from his Slovak roots—and he did, literally, walk out of his native country—to live and work in Hungary. Two years later he took a ship to America, the fabled land of wealth and freedom where he was sure a better life awaited him. He worked as a carpenter, living in the heavily populated Slovak ghettos of Chicago in the mid-West. In his spare time he attended classes in English and public oratory and even took part in amateur dramatics.

When America entered the First World War in 1917 Stefan was faced with a choice: go back to Slovakia and fight for the Austro-Hungarian Empire or stay in the US where he might well find himself drafted and having to fight against family and friends from the old country. He did not find either option particularly palatable. In the end he did neither. He fled to the Texas-Mexican border, intending to cross into Mexico to sit out the war but was tracked down, arrested and sent to prison for eighteen months. On his release at the end of the war, Stefan returned to Chicago and there met Pavlina, the Slovak woman who was to become his wife. At Pavlina's urging Stefan, always interested in left-wing politics, studied and read Marx and became an ardent supporter of the Russian communists in their revolution.

Both Stefan and Pavlina became increasingly disenchanted with America which, they decided, was definitely not the land of freedom and so, in 1921, with Pavlina now pregnant with Alexander, they returned to Czechoslovakia. In 1925, unable to settle, the

Dubceks moved to what is now known as Kyrgyzstan in the USSR. Living in an old military barracks, they and other 'settlers' developed a hand-to-mouth farming cooperative. It was rough and basic living.

With a lifestyle that was not far above the bread line, the family eventually moved to the industrial city of Gorky. Living was easier but poverty was never far away. In 1938, following Stalin's announcement that foreigners living in Russia either had to take up Soviet citizenship or leave the country, the Dubceks returned to Czechoslovakia where the 17-year-old Alexander settled down to the life of a solid, Soviet-educated communist. By now his reading, education and life experience had ensured that he was a party man, through and through.



The Dubcek family in 1925. Alexander is at left, his brother Julius on the right, between parents Pavlina and Stefan.

When war came once more to Europe in 1939 Alexander Dubcek, ideologically and emotionally opposed to the Nazi regime, joined a band of partisan guerrillas to fight against the Germans. He was wounded twice, his elder brother was killed and his father imprisoned in Mauthausen concentration camp. By some miracle, both Alexander and Stefan Dubcek survived their ordeals.

In 1945 Alexander met and married Anna Ondrisova. Despite his clear socialist principles which derided formal and organized religion as the ‘opiate of the masses’, he was the only post-war communist leader to have been married in a church ceremony. Dubcek and his wife remained together until Anna’s death in 1991.

By 1953 Alexander Dubcek had become regional secretary for a large part of central Slovakia. While Antonin Novotny—who had been held prisoner in Mauthausen with Alexander’s father—began developing his oppressive one-party/one-man government in Czechoslovakia, Dubcek was going up in the world. He was charged with developing the Slovak economy.*

He remained a staunch communist and did or said nothing that could be interpreted as criticism of the party. Partly as a reward for his service, he was granted a scholarship to the Higher Party School in Moscow but found it an unrewarding experience. Khrushchev was in the process of dismantling much of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the communist regime was in something of a cleft stick over who and what to believe. The teaching and the political ideology young Alexander encountered in the college were, perhaps inevitably, somewhat lukewarm.

After three years study in Moscow, Dubcek left a Russia that was still remodelling itself and returned to a repressive pro-Stalinist Czechoslovakia. Once established back home, he saw and quickly grew to despise many of the privileges Antonin Novotny had bestowed upon himself. One in particular would always be an anathema to Dubcek: as a middle-ranking party official he had to endure long weekends at Novotny’s special recreational centre outside Prague where party officials and guests would be ‘entertained’. Most party members who found themselves invited were more than happy to use the time to play up to Novotny and flatter him. Not Alexander Dubcek. Rather than become a presidential yes man, Dubcek spent as much time as he could on these weekends taking long walks in the countryside or playing with the children of the various officials. He did not like Novotny and, more importantly, Novotny had absolutely no time for him.

In 1963 Alexander Dubcek was appointed to the Kolder Commission which had been formed to look into government abuses of the 1950s and early 1960s. It was a significant

appointment for the young and still relatively inexperienced Slovak politician. One of the issues that the commission was charged with investigating was the 1952 trial and execution of Rudolf Slansky who was then general secretary of the Czech Communist Party. Along with thirteen other senior party officials, Slansky had been arrested, put on trial and condemned. It had all taken place over a decade before but his death and that of people like Milada Horakova, the only woman ever to be executed for high treason in Czechoslovakia, had virtually turned them into martyrs. Justice for the slain, many Czechs demanded, even though they were long dead.

The 1952 crisis had occurred in the wake of Yugoslavian President Tito's decision to split from the Soviet sphere of influence and his subsequent expulsion from the Comintern. Slansky's trial had been one of several such show trials in the satellite states behind the Iron Curtain. In the best traditions of Stalinism it was a rigged ballot, designed to prevent further splits in what Stalin was now desperately pushing as the united front of the Eastern Bloc.



As expected, with Stalin long dead and the threat of immediate personal violence diminished, the 1963 Kolder investigation was about as unbiased as any such a process could possibly be behind the Iron Curtain. After considerable debate and much calling of witnesses, the commission found that Slansky's judges at his trial had been presented with false evidence, carefully prepared by officials of the state, and that much of what condemned him and the others was nothing more than a pack of lies. Not only that, the full extent of governmental abuse in the 1950s was also now revealed. Dubcek claimed to have been shocked by what had been uncovered, with other members of the commission and the government expressing the same sentiments. Whether or not they were genuine or merely playing a game remains unclear: "The personal involvement of the top Czechoslovak leaders had reached almost savage proportions; top Party officials, including Novotny, had divided among themselves the property—down to pots and pans and bedsheets—of their former friends and colleagues whom they had sent to the gallows."*

Antonin Novotny, who had been one of the leading figures in the Czech regime at the time of the trials, now found himself the target for openly severe criticism—perhaps for the first real time in his political career. The final report was presented to a plenary session of the Czechoslovak Communist Party Central Committee in the spring of 1963. Novotny, attempting to forestall a potential coup or undue criticism, had forbidden Dubcek to speak. Despite the gagging order, Dubcek was able to present his speech in written form where his views were soon made clear. His belief was that all senior party officials who had been in office between 1940 and 1954 should shoulder at least some of the responsibility for what he referred to as "the terror". It was a clear message to Novotny.*

When the Slovak Central Committee came together for its Presidium in Bratislava in April 1963 Dubcek could not be denied the floor. These were his people, they identified with him and this was his forum.

After listening to Dubcek's criticism the Slovak Presidium declined the appointment of Michal Chudik, the supposed shoe-in candidate and Novotny's nominated representative as the new First Secretary of the Slovakian Committee. The decision triggered a frenetic response from Novotny who screamed abuse and stormed out of the committee chamber, vowing never to attend again. He kept his word.

Meanwhile the Slovak Central Committee nominated their own representative, someone they felt they could trust and work with: Alexander Dubcek. With Khrushchev now removed from office in the Soviet Union, his position filled by the arch-manipulator

and plotter Leonid Brezhnev, things were suddenly not looking good for Novotny. He plodded on—nothing ever moved swiftly in communist Czechoslovakia—and while Dubcek already had ideas for reform, he first had to secure his position.

By 1967 the process of de-Stalinization in the Soviet satellite states was almost complete. In Czechoslovakia Novotny had loosened the strings of central control but the real problem was yet to come. And in the minds of so many Czech people that problem was manifested in the stony face of Antonin Novotny, the man who occupied the very pinnacle of power in the country, the positions of party leader and president. He represented the hard edge of Soviet-backed authority, appearing as a soulless, self-interested bureaucrat. He had been in control of the country for what seemed an eternity, happily filling his pockets and satisfying his own desires. And yet the Czech people were no better off. Perhaps it was time for a change.

By the middle of 1967, with the Czech economy still in crisis, it was becoming clear that it would take more than an easing of censorship and relaxation of government repression to save Novotny now. That did not stop him fighting. In fact late 1967 and early 1968 saw something of a return to his repressive policies as he strove to save himself by once more clamping down on what he perceived as dissident forces.

On a dark, dreary November evening in 1967, a small group of Prague students held a protest against the poor heating and lighting in their Spartan dormitory accommodation. Carrying candles to symbolize the shoddy lighting in their rooms, the students hunched over the sputtering flames, trying hard to keep them alight in the bitter wind. They marched steadily up the hill towards Hradcany Castle, the seat of Czech government, chanting and singing as they went. But before they could reach the palace they found their way blocked by a police cordon and after some abuse was exchanged, a series of running fights broke out. It was an unpredicted outburst of thuggery from the police but to the marchers it appeared a premeditated attack. Many of the students were clubbed to the ground and at least fifty had to be taken to hospital. The news spread rapidly and further demonstrations quickly followed.

It was the start of a period of unrest. By the end of the year Novotny's return to "the hard line" had rebounded on him as students, who had revelled in the relaxed official attitudes of the past year, were not going to allow their new freedoms to be taken away from them without a fight. The protest movement—because that was what the student opposition had now become—grew stronger and more significant as 1967 drew to a close. Handing out leaflets to passers-by; haranguing shoppers, Czech nationals and tourists alike; holding public meetings and demonstrations; taking part in formal and informal debates with anyone who would care to listen, were only part of the campaign.

Meanwhile pressure on Novotny grew. Almost at his wits' end, he appealed to Brezhnev to come to Prague and lend his support to the beleaguered Czech government. This whirlwind, supposedly secret visit by the Soviet premier took place on 8/9 December 1967. He had come with a view to supporting Novotny but it took only a few interviews with senior party officials to realize that the Czech president had manoeuvred himself into an untenable position. Brezhnev stayed only overnight in Prague and left the next day, believing that the problems were little more than squabbles between Czech officials. How should they be dealt with? He was reported as saying, "It's up to you."

Novotny had never enjoyed the same degree of friendship with Brezhnev as he previously had with Khrushchev but even so he was shocked at what he considered the lack of support from the Soviets. Unless things changed soon it was clear that he was on his own. Heated discussions at the last Presidium meeting before Christmas saw Novotny's support, limited as it was, diminishing even further.



Milada Horakova, the only woman executed in Czechoslovakia for high treason, in the 1952 communist show trials.
(ABS / www.ustrcr.cz/cs)

Debate centred on the principle that the two top jobs in the country—that of president and secretary of the Czech Communist Party—should never be held by the same individual. It made sense, one way of preventing corruption at the top. Reluctantly, Novotny was forced to agree that, in principle at least, the idea was a sound one. The Central Committee was then adjourned until 3 January 1968.

The Christmas period was a tense and uneasy time. There were rumours that Novotny was planning a coup and the fear that the Czech army might be mobilized against his opponents blew like a winter wind down the narrow streets and across the plazas of Prague. In Brno and other large centres the fear was the same. Dubcek was unashamedly worried: “The time between the December and January sessions of the Central Committee had been very tense, with all kinds of rumours going around. I spent Christmas with my family in Bratislava and, quite frankly, I never stopped worrying about the proverbial 3 a.m. knock at the door.”*

He need not have been concerned. There was no coup, no use of force by Novotny or by his supporters and almost before they knew it, the date for the January committee meeting rolled around. There Dubcek found a surprise waiting for him. Novotny himself asked everyone present to write down the name of the person they would like to see appointed as First Secretary. When the votes were counted Dubcek, to the surprise of no one apart from himself, was top of the poll.

On 5 January 1968 Alexander Dubcek took over from Novotny as First Secretary or, as the Czech people called the job, as party chief. Novotny retained his position as president—for the time being, at least. Even he could see, however, that the writing was on the wall and that his time in power was now limited.

When the news filtered out the country was immediately engulfed with feelings of hope and enthusiasm. Everyone began to convince themselves that a new future beckoned and that along with the change of leadership would be universal changes. Nobody thought it was going to be easy but now at least there was a chance. Dubcek was an honest and popular figure who, people believed, would do the right thing for the country and the people. There would be no self-serving corruption in his regime. All right, people told themselves, so he had no experience of foreign affairs and was a poor public speaker but his heart was in the right place and he had the enviable gift of actually listening to the concerns and opinions of others. If nothing else this was one of the most welcome changes and it was there, right from the start of his tenure as party chief; it was something that had been lacking in Czechoslovakia for many years.

Not everyone was pleased by Dubcek's appointment, however. His family wept openly, knowing what a difficult position he now occupied. Even Dubcek had doubts about his fitness for the job, although he managed to conceal his reservations from all but his family. To the majority of Czechoslovaks he was single-mindedly intent on doing a necessary job.

From the beginning Brezhnev and Soviet Politburo had doubts about Dubcek and what he might do in Czechoslovakia. In particular there was the fear, an unfounded fear it must be said, that he could take the country out of the Soviet Bloc and yield to the capitalist pressures of West Germany, France, even the United States. Dubcek never once declared or even hinted at such a move but the Soviet concerns were prevalent as early as January 1968.



Soviet premier, the arch-manipulator and plotter Leonid Brezhnev, seen here in happier times, with Yugoslav President Tito, in Kiev. (Александр Тимофеевич Бормотов)

In hindsight it is hard to locate the cause of such fear. Czech foreign policy remained explicitly pro-Soviet for the entire length of Dubcek's brief rule. But then fear, particularly in autocratic regimes, rarely has a coherent or logical origin and the reforms that Dubcek had in mind were, as far as the Eastern Bloc was concerned, counter-revolutionary: "[It was] the only attempt of the period at structurally reforming a Communist regime from within, opening it up to greater freedoms and popular participation in government ... Soviet leaders feared that this so-called 'Communism with a human face' would spill over to the rest of Eastern Europe."*

The new First Secretary was aware of these concerns, at least up to a point, but felt able to work with them. What he underestimated was the strength of Soviet paranoia—as will be seen. For the moment Brezhnev and his colleagues kept their concerns close to their chests. It was a policy that deceived the Czechs and made the denouement, when it came, even more startling.

Dubcek may have misunderstood the Soviet position but what he did not underestimate was the complexity of problems within Czechoslovakia and the rabid polarization of opinion among his people. Those would be his first concerns. Yes, there had to be change, that was what the people wanted, but he also had to keep Moscow sweet and still work with Novotny's supporters. Contrary to what many were expecting, there was no immediate cull of Novotny's people within government circles, many of whom were soon relaying messages to the former leader and, inevitably, to Moscow. These Novotny moles were to be found at every level of the administration; even Dubcek's driver was a close friend and colleague of the former First Secretary and president. It cannot have made for pleasant dreams and easy sleep. Even as he accepted the nomination, Dubcek must have shuddered at the thought of the knives already angling into his back.



Antonin Novotny, seen here greeting President Sukarno of Indonesia. (Dutch National Archives)

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- * Kurlansky, pp. 28-9.
 - * Dubcek, p. 85.
 - * Ibid., p. 86.
 - * Ibid., p. 125
 - * Jussi Hanhimaki & Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War*, p. 243.

4. COMING OF THE SPRING

Alexander Dubcek was to spend just 220 days in control of Czech affairs. In the aftermath of his brief period in power he was criticized by some scholars and writers for moving too slowly—he was also criticized by others for moving too fast. Regardless of how he set about his task he was always liable to be a target for elements of scorn or criticism. The analogy of ducks in a fairground shooting gallery is too powerful to ignore.

And yet having now, in January 1968, been elevated to the post of First Secretary, he was suddenly in a position to bring about much-needed changes within the Czech political system. He knew the risks and, as a caring and understanding man of honour, wanted to instigate the changes that were so necessary in order to perpetuate true socialism. He never lost that ideal: socialism at the head of everything.

The trouble was, no sooner had he settled into his new office than he found himself laid low by a virulent bout of flu. It had struck him first in December, and then seemed to lie fallow over the Christmas and New Year holiday period. Now it reappeared with a vengeance and it was over a month into 1968 before he was on his feet again.

Once recovered Dubcek's first action was to ensure the creation and passing of an action programme that would enable economic reform of the country. It would also look at several other issues that were adversely affecting Czechoslovakia. Preparing the programme was an exacting task that took many weeks to write and compile into an acceptable format, let alone think through. Even as it was being written, Dubcek became increasingly convinced that even the most basic of reforms was going to require a free press if it was ever going to have an effect on the Czech people.

Consequently, the Soviet-backed Presidium decision of 1966 that had legalized censorship in Czechoslovakia was both an impediment and a liability. In March 1968 it was revoked. Almost immediately the regular Thursday briefings by Jiri Hendrych, one of Novotny's staunchest allies and most effective remaining apparatchiks, were allowed to wither and die away—much to the relief of Czech journalists who saw these weekly meetings as little more than pieces of official dictation telling them what they could and could not write.

While the media was still controlled by the government, those who took an interest in the news—and in Czechoslovakia in the late 1960s that meant most of the population—began to realize that what they were receiving was no longer the usual diet of stale party propaganda but something totally new and unexpected: “To the utter amazement of their readers, listeners and viewers, the government was using the press to promote the idea of democracy—communist democracy, it was always careful to emphasize.”*



In the spring of 1967, the pavement cafés of Prague became ‘reading rooms’ with the liberalization of press censorship. (Tittl)

It was clear that editors and publishers were finally being trusted to use their good sense and judgement over what could and could not be permitted to find its way into print. Such independence had not been seen before and, while welcomed in Czechoslovakia, it also managed to prompt the raising of more than a few eyebrows in Moscow.

It was not just that. In March, for the first time in living memory, western newspapers and journals suddenly became freely available. In Prague cafés, in what became effectively ‘reading rooms’ people flocked to pore over the much-thumbed papers and find out what the rest of the world felt about Czechoslovakia. Television and radio were also now able to offer an uncensored and honest view of western views and ideas.

When, at the end of February, the Czech Writers’ Union began to publish a new weekly literary journal, *Literarni listy*, it quickly became the leading vehicle for political criticism and for a reworking of the traditional, party-led views of recent Czech history. The publication was an updated version of an original literary journal, *Literarni noviny*. Only the previous year, following a series of articles advocating that literature should stand apart from party doctrine and policy, Novotny and Hendrych had arranged for it to be taken over by the ministry of culture. Only in this way, they felt, could the “unhelpful” works of dissident and argumentative writers be prevented from achieving wide circulation.

With the easing of censorship the Czech Writers’ Union saw an opportunity to re-establish the value and standing of literature. By the end of the summer, *Literarni listy* had achieved a circulation of over 300,000, making it the most significant and widely read literary journal in Europe. Playwright Vaclav Havel wrote in the magazine about the need to discard the one-party state and for the creation of effective opposition parties. Philosopher Ivan Svitak went one step further. After arguing for a genuine three-party system, Svitak went on to say that whatever reforms had taken place, whatever freedoms had been granted, they were not true reforms: they were measures that been slipped through because of the power struggle at the top of the party. The entire apparatus of the Czech Communist Party, he said, needed to be taken apart otherwise it would turn, spitting and snarling, on those who were attempting to reform it.

Svitak had a point. Reform was a difficult matter while Antonin Novotny was still president. His approval was required on all government decrees and decisions, in effect giving him the power of the veto. Unless something was done about that then any reforms would be little more than esoteric dreams and ideas.

Then, as if by magic, a series of corruption scandals involving Novotny and his son were suddenly made public—something that would not have been possible in the old days of censorship. The charges were long and heavy, involving matters like selling black-market petrol and other government-issue goods. Novotny, always the slugger, tried to fight back, gathering himself a support group of friends and cronies. He was seen drinking beer with his new colleagues in the bars and taverns of Prague and even had photographs taken to show that he was, after all, a man of the people. Like many of his policies and actions it was a shallow attempt at creating an image. It was far, far too late. He was by now a hugely disliked, even hated, figure and on 22 March 1968 he resigned the presidency. He was replaced by General Ludvik Svoboda.

Svoboda, a war hero, was not the first choice of the now-powerful student lobby. When they heard of his appointment they launched a demonstration in favour of their choice, Cestmir Cisar, a well-known television personality. Dubcek knew that Cisar, a well-known supporter of reform, would be the wrong choice for Moscow, hence the appointment of General Svoboda. The student demonstration went on until past midnight, the marchers demanding to meet with Dubcek. They were only placated when Dubcek came from party headquarters to speak to them. To begin with, he assured them, a place would be found for Cisar in the government. When the students asked for guarantees that the old days would not come back, the First Secretary responded with the words, “You, the young, are the guarantee.”*

With Novotny safely out of the way, Dubcek’s action programme was finally launched in April 1968. Based on three principles—freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of movement—there was an emphasis on the availability and sale of consumer goods. It was important for the Czech economy, the programme declared, that the country should join the scientific and technical revolution that had already gripped the rest of the world. The action programme was clearly rooted in the reality of Czechoslovakia as it existed in 1968, with all its faults and problems. It was a bold step as, until then, the Soviet model of governance had been a prerequisite approach. Ethnic differences were, if considered at all, regarded as mere decoration. The programme, therefore, was a radical departure from the Soviet-biased norm.

In order to compete with the capitalism of the West, the programme stated, important positions should be filled, not with apparatchiks but with intelligent, educated and capable individuals who would then drive through necessary changes. Already the policies of the 1940s and 1950s were causing concern. Many of these—such as centralist and directive methods of administration—had, in the opinion of Dubcek and his supporters, outlived their useful lives.

There were many other significant points to the programme, notably the possibility of a multiparty government and curbs being laid on the power of the secret police. Importantly, good relations were to be maintained with Western states but full cooperation with the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries was essential.

There was never the faintest hint of leaving the Eastern Bloc but the possibility of dividing Czechoslovakia into a federation of three republics—Bohemia, Moravia-Silesia and Slovakia—was mooted. Ultimately the divide did happen, the only change to actually survive the later Soviet intervention, but the federated states were reduced to just two, the Czech Socialist Republic and the Slovak Socialist Republic. The concept of a federated nation had an appeal to Alexander Dubcek. As a child of Slovakia he wanted a renewal of Slovak identity and a degree of compensation for the underrepresented Slovaks in federal bodies. A breakup of the country was never intended but more power to and recognition of the Slovaks was essential if Czechoslovakia was ever to function as an entity.



Complaints about the living conditions of the people had been circulating for some time. In the cities and in the rural areas of the country—where farmers had been forced to abide by the party line, growing only what they were told to grow, and where innovation was frowned upon—peasants and workers were forced to exist in conditions that were close to real poverty. It was an issue that Dubcek knew he had to address. Unfortunately for him and for the people, Soviet intervention forestalled any significant improvements.

The action programme proposed a ten-year transition period in order to allow the changes to take place. At the end of that time there would be democratic elections and a new form of democratic socialism would be established. At no stage did the document deride communism although Dubcek, in his April address to the Presidium of the Czech Communist Party did, for the first time, speak of creating “socialism with a human face”.

Freedom of the press would, it was believed, exclude pre-publication censorship. At the same time freedom of movement would not just allow Czech citizens to travel freely, it would also afford them the right to remain abroad for as long as they liked—permanently, if they wished—without the fear of being labelled as emigrants.

As a working agenda the action programme was a revolutionary document but, as with many such initiatives, there were many who felt it did not go far enough. Dubcek counselled moderation, warning of excesses and believing that Brezhnev and the Soviet Union would tolerate a degree of licence but would draw the line at changes they felt were too radical. As far as many Czechs were concerned, he might have been talking to the wall. The more freedoms the people acquired, the more they wanted. It was human nature but Dubcek was trying to balance their desires with what Moscow would permit, never an easy path to tread.

Soon anti-Soviet articles and comments were commonplace in the press and on the streets as the more radical Czechs made their voices heard. A number of unaffiliated political clubs were founded and culture suddenly became an important issue. In Prague alone there were over twenty theatres, all of them with plays performing to full houses every night. Among the popular successes of the year was *Who's Afraid of Franz Kafka?*, the title deliberately mirroring Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The title was probably the most compelling part of the enterprise. The works of the great Czech writer Kafka had been available since 1963, much to the delight of the young and anything that even hinted at a connection was almost bound to be a success.*



Perhaps the most significant of the various offerings was *Last Stop* by Jiri Sextr and Jiri Suchy, a play that explored the possibilities and the fears of what might happen if Dubcek's reforms should ever be undone. Audiences sat, entranced, with just that frisson of fear that is conjured up by a good-quality horror film: what if, what if?

It was in the field of music and its accompanying youth culture that the feelings and emotions of the time were most fully realized. British and American rock bands, the songs of Simon and Garfunkel, the psychedelic offerings of the Moody Blues, all were now available. In Prague melodies and the raw rock floated up out of the cellar bars and jazz clubs like the Reduta on Wenceslas Square.

The most desirable object of that spring, surpassing even ownership of the latest Beatles album, was a pair of blue Levi jeans. Everyone wanted them, almost everyone wore them. The black market trade in denim jeans reached astronomical proportions and if Levi Strauss did not make a fortune out of the Prague Spring then publicity from the thousands upon thousands of pairs of jeans must have been worth its weight in gold.

Turtleneck sweaters, a deliberate aping of the preferred jumpers of Britain's 'Fab Four', were also seen everywhere. Even government workers sported turtlenecks instead of the standard shirt and tie that had always defined Czech officialdom. Sales of Coca-Cola were not far behind the booming backstreet clothes market. Fizzy drinks, previously an emblem of the dissolute West, were available in cafés and on street corners, their share of the youth market—for a time at least—surpassing even the sales of good Czech beer.

As winter eased into spring new television and radio programmes were launched, many of them encouraging input—usually by means of telephone calls—from listeners, thus giving the public a voice and a forum for change: “Public meetings attended by thousands of people, especially the young, further broadened the involvement of ordinary citizens in the affairs of state. Thus the political climate changed dramatically in a few weeks.”*

In line with this new involvement of the general public in state affairs there were calls for the axing of those who had been Novotny supporters, notably Michal Chudik, retained after Novotny's fall as chair of the Slovak National Council. By the end of March he and others like him had gone, quietly but firmly removed from office.

A new government was formed, the Presidium remaining the most important institution in the country. While Dubcek was able to appoint many of his political allies, old supporters like Ota Sik and Gustav Husak who both became deputy prime ministers, he was forced to compromise over certain pro-Soviet appointees.

Men like Drahomir Kolder and Oldrich Svestka grew closer to the Soviet Union by the day. When the simmering crisis of August eventually erupted into action such men were significant players in what Dubcek was to call a pro-Soviet conspiracy.

The Soviet Union had already confirmed limited support for Alexander Dubcek— or at least some type of acceptance—when, in February, Brezhnev and the leaders of all Eastern Bloc countries convened in Prague to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Czech Communist Party coming to power. Dubcek was, Brezhnev felt, a safe pair of hands. And yet, while the Soviets undoubtedly saw Dubcek as someone they could rely on, they remained wary of what he was doing. Too many reforms brought about too quickly would, ultimately, only result in disaster.

As a consequence, the Soviet leadership vacillated and stopped short of outright approval of the way things were being handled in Czechoslovakia or of condemning them out of hand. It was a difficult time, the enthusiasm of the Czechs being balanced by the seeming nonchalance of the Soviets. In hindsight, there is no doubt that Dubcek and his supporters misinterpreted the signals from Moscow, assuming that Brezhnev was happy with the course of reform.[†]

Even the less-than-pleasant welcome from the Eastern Bloc states at the Dresden Conference, held on 23 March 1968, failed to alarm the Czech government. Romania and Yugoslavia were not represented at the conference but the opinion of the other communist countries was that events in Czechoslovakia—starting with lack of censorship—appeared to verge on counter-revolution. Brezhnev maintained a stony silence.

Dubcek defended the removal of censorship, stating that it was an internal affair and that having now removed it there was no way that the government could determine what journalists and writers could or could not say. The action programme was now in place, copies would be circulated and careful reading of the document would show that its intention was to develop communism, not destroy it. Dubcek left the conference and went home, troubled but not unduly worried, and the reforms continued.

Dubcek was later to say that his biggest mistake was in trusting the Soviets. Never for a moment did he believe that Brezhnev would condone a military solution to the problem. As far as Dubcek was concerned there was no problem and the reforms he was putting in place were being carried out with the best interests of the Eastern Bloc at heart. Dubcek was a committed communist and remained a committed communist even after the Soviet invasion of August. He was clear all along that he wanted to preserve the rule of the party. At the same time he sought popular support from the Czech people by cutting out or diminishing the effect of the more repressive features of Iron Curtain communism.



If there is one word that sums up Dubcek's 1968 regime it has to be 'trust'. Being able to trust the people of Czechoslovakia—to make the right decisions, to act responsibly, to support government decisions—was a major step forward for any communist regime in post-war Europe. It was an attitude that stemmed from the belief that the government, the effective rulers of the country, did not know all of the answers. And that, of course, symbolized a breakdown of the totalitarian rule that had existed during Novotny's long period in power.

It was a bold and brave stance to take but it undoubtedly alarmed the men in Moscow. Crystal-ball gazing is rarely fruitful but to Brezhnev and his colleagues it was all too easy to see Dubcek taking Czechoslovakia out of the confederacy of Eastern Bloc states. And if that happened, they feared, the Czechs would be followed by the other lukewarm countries of Romania and Yugoslavia. The prospect was far from comforting. For the Soviet Union it was less a matter of preserving communism than it was about maintaining the status quo that had existed since the days of the Bolsheviks. Something would have to be done—but not yet!

The Russian Revolution of 1917 had spawned something of a monster, different politically and socially from the western democracies. Deposing the Tsar had been one thing; having him assassinated was something else entirely and it immediately garnered the disapproval, even the loathing, of Western democracies and monarchies. Even the term 'communism' had, for so long now, sent shivers of apprehension down the spines of diplomats and politicians of the West but it required a united front with Russia and the satellite states standing together. Anything less would be a disaster.

The huge numbers of tourists from Western Europe who were now flocking to the previously 'out of bounds' communist state of Czechoslovakia was surely proof positive that the term 'communism' had not put off anyone. If anything, the novelty value only increased foreign interest—and, of course, each tourist from Britain or France or West Germany brought with them much needed economic benefits. It seemed to be working perfectly well.

It was a stance with which the Czech people broadly agreed. In a poll taken that summer only 5 percent of the population wanted a return to capitalism while 89 percent wished to retain communism. Despite this clear belief in the communist ideal, the enthusiasm of the Czechs for reform continued unabated. Moscow might wonder how this could be achieved but Dubcek and his supporters had no doubt that reform and communism could run in parallel.

Arguably, Dubcek was losing control of the whole process which seemed, now, like a snowball rolling downhill, gathering momentum and substance as it went. The Dresden Conference should have been a warning for him, a marker to say that the patience of Brezhnev and the Politburo was limited. Either Dubcek did not see it or simply chose to ignore it.

* Kurlansky, p. 239.

* Ibid., p. 241.

* Ibid., p. 246.

* Dubcek, p. 138.

† Williams, pp. 66-7.

5. DISSOLVING THE DREAM

In many respects the reforms and resolutions that Alexander Dubcek implemented between March and June 1968 were not actually that revolutionary. The easing of censorship was probably the most significant reform to be instigated but, as Dubcek envisaged it, such a process would only help to maintain stability in the country, not hinder it. Other staples of communist rule—state ownership of industry, collective farming and so on—were not to be touched.

Soviet intervention before things got out of hand—as Brezhnev would have described it—may well have put a stop to or limited Dubcek's plans. However, he was not a reformer who changed things simply to court publicity or popularity; he was a man who was going about his duty as he saw it. And he would do anything to help his country and its people: "Censorship would yield to a new openness, but no one was to articulate an ideology hostile to communism. Market forces would replace rigid central planning but there was to be no large-scale private ownership or de-collectivization of agriculture."^{*}

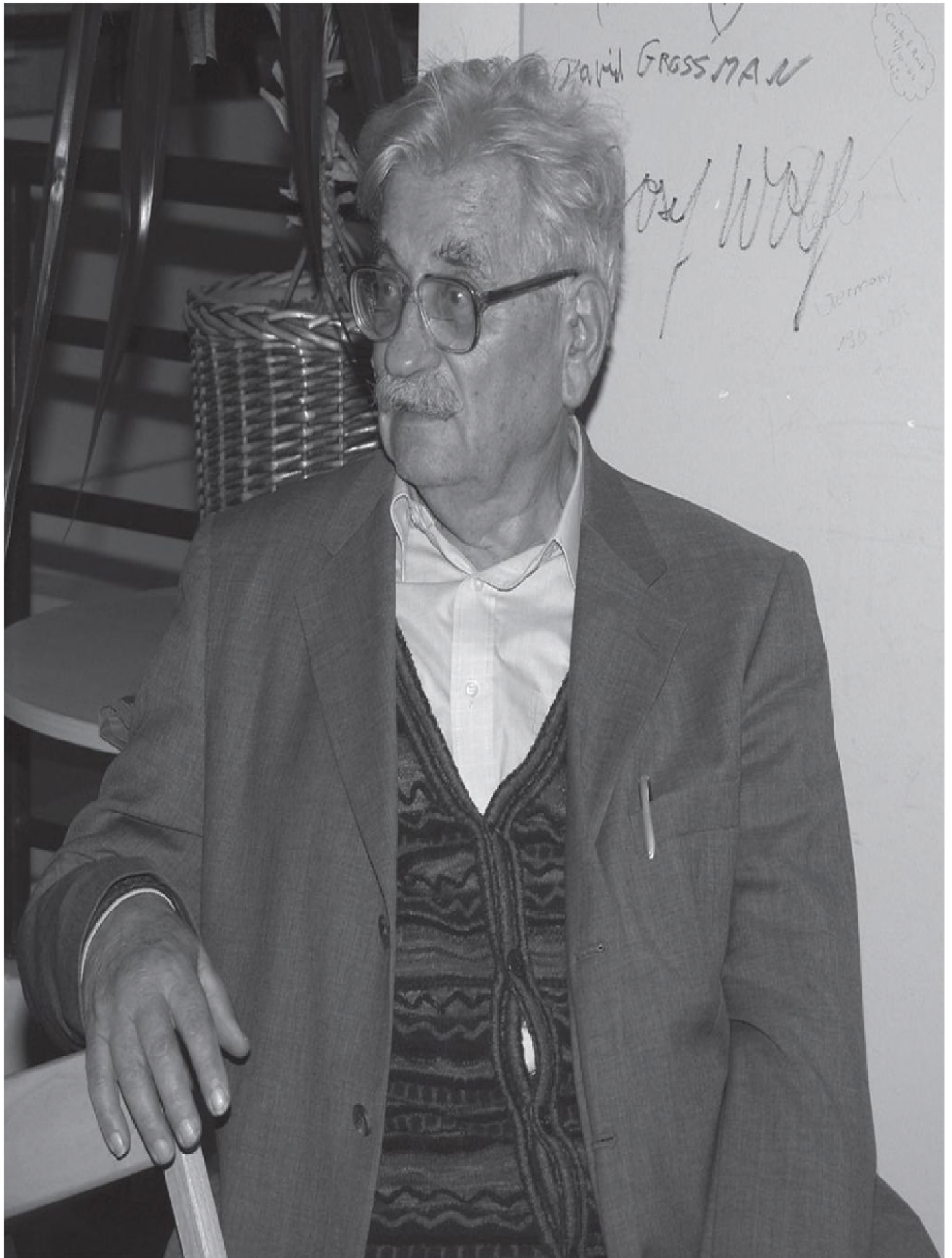
Unfortunately for Dubcek, events soon began to run away from him. He had 'unleashed the dogs of war' only to discover that they often had different views from him and once out there, in the public domain as it were, they were very difficult to control. He tried to limit the reforms, knowing that the Soviets would stand only so much, always aware of the need to go slowly.

On 27 June 1968 the writer Ludvik Vaculik published '2,000 Words', a manifesto that expressed serious concerns about conservative elements in the Czech Communist Party. The article appeared in *Literarni listy* and in several daily newspapers, ensuring that it was widely read by the intelligentsia and by the ordinary working men and women of Czechoslovakia. But Vaculik did not stop with listing his concerns. He went on to urge the Czech people to take the initiative in completing the reform programme that Dubcek had begun.

Significantly—and particularly damaging for Dubcek—the manifesto began with a quick survey of Czechoslovakia and its moral and economic decay since the communists had taken control. In a country where workers could make no decisions for themselves, Vaculik declared: "Most people lost interest in public affairs; they worried only about

themselves and about their money ... To sum up, the country reached a point where its spiritual health and character were both ruined.”†

It was a true enough statement, a damning observation, but the manifesto was, ultimately, counterproductive. Desperate to keep the peace, Dubcek appeared on TV to denounce ‘2,000 Words’. Vaculik was dismissed from the party and the grey men in Moscow logged down one more strike against the Czech reformers.



Czech writer Ludvik Vaculik, decades after his '2,000 Words' proved the catalyst for the Warsaw Pact invasion.
(Ludek Kovar)

No one doubted the integrity of Ludvik Vaculik and there were many who agreed with his views but the manifesto was, arguably, one of the most significant elements in deciding the forthcoming Soviet invasion. To those watching and waiting in Moscow '2,000 Words' summed up the attitude of the majority of Czechs and laid waste Dubcek's claims that he was not intending to destroy communism in his country. Vaculik had not intended his document to be used against Dubcek and the government but in the uncertain world of Eastern Bloc politics that was how it was viewed—and used.

Vaculik's manifesto showed, quite clearly, the difficulties that Dubcek was facing. It was, unfortunately, a problem of his own making. Once the stable door had been opened it was proving increasingly difficult for Dubcek's government to keep the horses in check. That, as the First Secretary was discovering, was one of the drawbacks of free speech. A draconian or autocratic approach might have been less palatable but it would certainly have been easier to manage.

In the June/July poll that had come down so heavily in favour of communist control, the vast majority of Czechs had indicated that they were quite happy with the way that the government was managing Czech affairs. It was a mark of respect and contentment but, as ever, the tiny minority managed to grab the headlines and, more ominously, Moscow's attention.

While most people were content with the way matters were developing under Dubcek, it was not a 100-percent seal of approval. A miniscule 7 percent said that they were dissatisfied, either radicals for whom reform was not coming quickly enough or the rump of Novotny's supporters who were resentful of anything Dubcek thought or did. Whatever Moscow felt about the reformation it was clear that the vast majority of the Czech people were more than content. And that contentment—without the influence or agreement of the Soviet Union—was a dagger thrust into the soft underbelly of Czechoslovakia, a swift and self-inflicted wound that would ultimately prove fatal.

By July 1968 the Soviet Union had become more than a little disillusioned with Dubcek. Despite his continual affirmation that he was not intending to break with the Soviet sphere of influence, members of the Politburo could not allow themselves to believe that he was telling the truth. Mistrust simply added more fuel to a pyre that was already tinder-box dry.

By July, even as the Czechs were expressing their loyalty to the communist ideals and ideology, the men in Moscow had decided they would have to act. Nobody was yet sure

about what that action would be but when the options were considered it came down to one of three possible solutions.

Firstly they could pressurize or convince Dubcek to fit in with Soviet policies and programmes. This option would entail the Czech First Secretary abandoning his plans for reform and returning the country to its pre-Dubcek course. Secondly, they could support those officials in Czechoslovakia still loyal to Moscow in an uprising that would take the country by force. And thirdly, they could simply invade.* The easiest option was the last but it was also the most dangerous. It had taken a dozen years of diplomacy and pandering to the West to recover from the effects of the 1956 invasion of Hungary. Military intervention had suppressed the Hungarian Uprising but it had been done at the expense of credibility and acceptance in the West.

Dubcek had often told the world that he was not in the business of damaging or abandoning the Soviet Union. Full-blooded communist to the last, he wanted to work with the Soviets. Therefore, to the western world it seemed that there was no reason to invade Czechoslovakia which, unlike Hungary, had always been an ally of the Soviet Union. Any invasion would be bound to bring Western criticism and fury down upon the collective heads of Brezhnev and the Politburo. Remonstrance like that was something that Brezhnev could certainly ill afford. Relations between the Soviet Union and the US were only just beginning to thaw. A treaty limiting nuclear weapons had recently been signed and there was a distinct possibility of better trading facilities between the two powers. Brezhnev did not need to upset that particular applecart.



The other two options were equally as fraught. An internal coup by Soviet and Novotny supporters looked less likely by the day as Dubcek's popularity increased. It was decided, one last time, to attempt to bring him round to the Soviet way of thinking but, in the likely event of this failing, the Politburo reluctantly decided that it would have to resort to the military option.

In order to make any military operation as easy and as efficient as possible, Czechoslovakia was immediately encircled by Warsaw Pact troops that mustered on the borders, hundreds of thousands of them, men and matériel from East Germany, Poland, Hungary and the Ukraine. It was an immense show of solidarity and was backed by a huge number of Soviet troops. It was menacing, deliberately so, and within a few short weeks Czechoslovakia found itself entirely surrounded by hostile Eastern Bloc forces.

There were actually large bodies of Soviet troops within the borders of Czechoslovakia at this time. In June thousands of them had been allowed to cross the border for what the Soviet Union termed as manoeuvres. It had happened before, many times, but never involving such a vast quantity of troops and tanks. The manoeuvres ended on 30 June but several weeks passed and still the Red Army remained in Czechoslovakia.

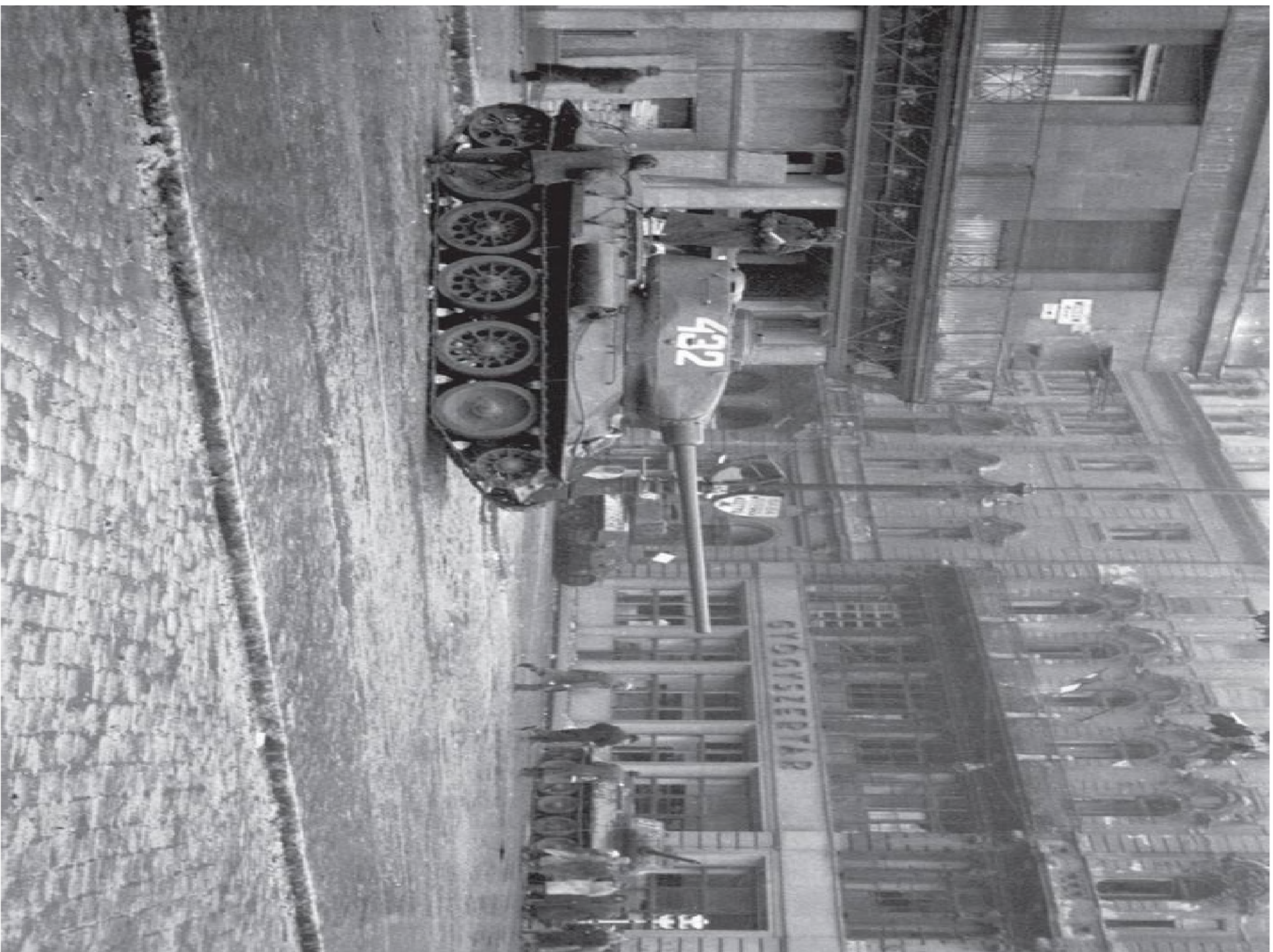
Despite repeated requests the Soviet troops failed to return to their bases. Instead, they offered a whole range of excuses, everything from their vehicles requiring repairs to Czech bridges that were unsafe and in need of rebuilding before Soviet vehicles could use them. It fooled no one and soon rumours of a Soviets military action—even drawing up lists of people to be arrested—began to circulate. The threat of an invasion had suddenly grown very real.

In what was the Soviet Union's last attempt to woo Dubcek, the Czech leader was now invited—ordered—to travel to Moscow to discuss the situation in Czechoslovakia with Brezhnev and members of the Politburo. The invitation placed Dubcek and the Czech government in a quandary. To meet with Brezhnev on Soviet territory would, they decided, look too much like “a humiliating surrender” and so the invitation was declined. But Dubcek in particular was realistic enough to appreciate that, sooner or later, a meeting would have to take place.

It was a tense time. Dubcek rarely slept more than three or four hours a night, knowing that he was being squeezed between the Soviet juggernaut and the newly spawned Czech desire for reform. Neither side knew the pressures he was under; arguably neither really cared. But one thing was clear in those early summer days of

1968—Dubcek spoke for Czechoslovakia, Dubcek spoke for the people of Czechoslovakia, Dubcek *was* Czechoslovakia.

After several false starts and suggestions, it was finally agreed that a meeting of the full Politburo and the Presidium of the Czech Communist Party would be held in the railway station at Cierna, a border crossing between Slovakia and the Soviet Union. Cierna was actually in Czechoslovakia, not the Soviet Union but it was close enough, just a few miles away as the crow flew. The talks were to be held in the railwaymen's clubhouse at Cierna station, the Soviets arriving by train every morning and then boarding the carriages again in the evening to be taken back across the border to spend the night. The Czech delegation would stay in Cierna.*



Some twelve years after the brutal suppression of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, the Soviets were only slowly emerging from the fog of western censure. (Fortepan / Kurutz Marton)

The situation was clouded somewhat by the sudden appearance of what became known as ‘The Warsaw Letter’. It was a statement signed by the leaders of Bulgaria, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and the Soviet Union, claiming that hostile forces within Czechoslovakia were attempting to detach the country from the communist camp. Dubcek immediately denied this, both before the Cierna meeting and at the subsequent conference in Bratislava. History, it seemed, was fond of repeating itself, particularly that year, and Dubcek must by now have been heartedly sick of having to reiterate his position over and over again.

The Cierna conference began on Monday, 29 July. Despite its unique nature—the full Politburo had never left the Soviet Union before, not as a unit—it was soon clear that both the Soviets and the Czechs had encased themselves in solid, unmoveable positions. Neither side would give an inch.

No journalists were allowed to report on the meetings with the result that in both the Soviet Union and in Czechoslovakia rumour and speculation were rife. What was being discussed? Who had managed to achieve the upper hand? Nobody knew.

Dubcek was abundantly clear about one thing. The Czech people were virulently opposed to granting any concessions to the Soviets: “We received thousands and thousands of letters, telegrams and resolutions from the whole country, expressing full support for our position. The slogan of the day was ‘Be with us; we are with you’. That solidarity was all-embracing and touching.”[†] Never before had the Czech nation come together in a unified stand like this. Unable to sleep one night, Dubcek took a walk and immediately found himself surrounded by railwaymen, all of whom expressed support and determination not to concede anything to the Soviets. Brezhnev’s response was simply to shrug and comment that he, too, could have sacksful of such mail and support from his people if he so chose to order it.

By the third day of the conference it was clear that things were going nowhere fast. Yet there had to be a conclusion and eventually Brezhnev, sick in his railway carriage—or at least pretending to be sick in his railway carriage—suggested that another conference be held, this time involving all the member states in the Warsaw Pact.

Dubcek agreed and returned to Prague where he immediately appeared on television, assuring the Czech people that the sovereignty of the nation had not been threatened or damaged in any way. Significantly, he declared that it was important to maintain good relations with the Soviet Union—the alternative was sitting there, waiting menacingly, on the borders. Therefore verbal and written attacks on the Soviets were to be avoided.



The subliminal message was that if the Soviet Union was not provoked or annoyed there would be no military intervention. It was a heartfelt request, a genuine statement that, while not revoking or limiting free speech in any way, seemed to be making the plea that it would be sensible to rein things in for a while. Dubcek was clear that the reforms would continue: “We will keep following the direction that we started pursuing in January of this year. The Party is supported by the trust of our people. The people will not allow any return to pre-January times.”*



It was calculated but heartfelt and it appeared to work. To the joy of the Czech people, the day after Dubcek's TV appearance the Soviet troops finally loaded up and left Czechoslovakia.

If the Soviets were gone, another occupying force now appeared, in ever-increasing numbers, not a military invasion but—tourists! That July the youth of the whole Western world seemed to gravitate to Czechoslovakia and to Prague in particular. They came by foot, by bus and by train, a few of the wealthier ones by air. It did not matter how they travelled, what was important was that they were there. And for the time at least they seemed intent on staying. Students and tourists had come before but not like this. Now they came in their thousands, all of them eager to see for themselves what all the fuss was about and to enjoy new experiences. Prague was different, it was exotic and exciting; Prague was where it was all happening. They came in their thousands and they mingled with their new Czech friends. They strummed their guitars, smoked their pot and made love under the stars. They danced in the clubs or on the streets; they listened to speeches and believed, genuinely believed, that they were part of a new freedom. It was like the summer of love reborn. In what has been described as a frenzy of new expression, graffiti began to appear on the walls and buildings of Prague. It mirrored the crude chalking that had, for some time now, been commonplace in Western Europe and the US, but in the stolid Eastern Bloc countries it was as rare and mystical as any painting by Gauguin or Lautrec. The inevitable Kilroy was there; of course he was: the universal but little understood drawing of a small, fat man peering over his wall. In the main, however, the graffiti was clever and intelligent, the product of the intelligentsia, whether Czech or western. It might have infuriated the more conservative Czechs or Soviets but to the youth of the country it was as essential as blue Levis and turtleneck sweaters:

The walls are ears, your ears are walls.

Make love not war.

Neither a robot nor a slave.

I am a Marxist of the Groucho faction.

*The aggressor is not the person who revolts but the one who conforms.**

If the graffiti of 1968 was a statement made by the young then for that summer—and perhaps for several summers to come—their canvas was the echoing streets and walls of Prague. The old stone buildings were an empty book and the youth of the world needed no second invitation to fill it.

Ivan Jirous, manager of The Plastic People of the Universe, later wrote in an essay on rock and roll resistance that what was created that year in Prague was a community “aiming to live in truth”.[†] It was idealistic and it was unreal but it was how the youth of the world—particularly the youth of the world who had come to spend time in Prague and Czechoslovakia—genuinely felt. The air was humid and feverish with expectation, people swinging wildly between the ecstasy of sudden freedom and the dread of knowing, deep inside, that this could not continue. Few would admit but it was clear to many that a reckoning was coming—and that it was coming soon.

* Williams, p. 26.

† https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Two_Thousand_Words

* Kurlansky, p. 147.

* Dubcek, p. 167

† Ibid., p. 168.

* www.euronets.com/2018/08/20/prague-spring-at-50

* Quoted in Kurlansky, p. 228.

† Ivan Jirous, quoted in *Rolling Stone*, 1976.

6. LAST DAYS OF SUMMER

Brezhnev's proposed conference involving the satellite countries as well as the USSR and Czechoslovakia was held in Bratislava just a few days after the original meeting in Cierna broke up. It was now the beginning of August and, even if they did not know it, time was running out for the people of the 'new' Czechoslovakia.

With satellite states like East Germany and Poland, implacable supporters of each and every Soviet proposal, included in the meeting, much of the territory covered was the same as at Cierna. The sticking point remained the right of individual Eastern Bloc countries to make their own decisions regarding internal developments. After what seemed like an impasse, Alexei Kosygin—always a staunch supporter of Brezhnev and the standard party line—unexpectedly stepped in and offered a compromise. Each individual communist party should, Kosygin said, creatively solve any problems of further socialist development within their own borders. He went on to stress the preservation of sovereignty and the inviolability of individual territory. In effect it was a pledge of non-interference in Czech affairs and the suggestions were immediately incorporated into what now became the Bratislava Declaration.

At the time the declaration was received with considerable acclaim, both in Czechoslovakia and in the wider world. Dubcek believed that it was an open door for further reforms as and when they were felt to be needed: "The Washington Post commenting on the Bratislava Declaration a day after its publication, drew a similar conclusion. It described the Bratislava conference as a 'Soviet Playa Giron', a reference to the failed US-sponsored Bay of Pigs Invasion in April 1961. That is, it understood the conference as a Soviet retreat and a Czechoslovak achievement."*

The duplicity of the Soviet Union was certainly not appreciated, even though the continued presence of Soviet armour on the borders of Czechoslovakia should have alerted Western statesmen and military leaders to the continued danger. Part of the trouble was that nobody wanted to believe in the possibility of a Soviet invasion: ignore it, and it would disappear.

After Bratislava the delegates returned to their respective countries. There was a general relaxation of tension, particularly in Czechoslovakia where there was now real

hope that the country would be left alone to deal with its problems as its leaders saw fit. That was effectively what Ludvik Vaculik's '2,000 Words' had been suggesting when he had asked for the Czech Communist Party to be held responsible for standards of openness. The irony was not lost on Alexander Dubcek and the other Czech leaders.



Romanian strongman Nicolae Ceaușescu (waving) visiting Czechoslovakia in 1968, seen here with Alexander Dubcek (left) and Ludvik Svoboda (centre, with white hair). (Romanian National Archives)

Meanwhile, the diplomatic round of visits and official engagements went on as usual. If there was a sub-plot to the wide range of visits by communist leaders to Czechoslovakia then the general public was not aware of them. To begin with, that August Dubcek received presidents Tito and Ceausescu on formal visits to Prague.

Both men, leaders of decidedly lukewarm communist regimes, were warmly greeted by the Czech crowds and in private meetings with Dubcek pledged their support. In no uncertain words, they told him that neither Yugoslavia nor Romania would take up arms against Czechoslovakia. It was reassuring news and confirmed that Dubcek had been right in his belief and decisions.

Walter Ulbricht from East Germany was another visitor in the final days of the Prague Spring. Unlike Tito and Ceausescu, Ulbricht was not popular in Czechoslovakia and so did not garner the popular acclaim that the two previous visitors had been given. But his arrival did mean that at least he and Dubcek were talking. Physically unappealing, Ulbricht was also duplicitous in the extreme and despite what appeared to be pleasant and informal debate, after his visit he went immediately to Moscow where he reported to Brezhnev on what had been discussed. Perhaps the high point of his visit to Prague had been when he sat in front of the collected Czech press and glibly told them that there was no such thing as censorship in East Germany: all laughed but it was a hollow, unconvincing sound.

As if Ulbricht was not enough, Janos Kadar, leader of the Hungarian vassal state, was yet another significant Eastern Bloc commander to now visit Czechoslovakia. He arrived on 17 August, clearly coming at the behest of Brezhnev and cronies. During their secret meeting in Komarno, Kadar attempted to convince Dubcek that he should implement the agreements reached in the recent discussions with the Soviet Union. Dubcek's response was that the agreements, such as they were, were being implemented and that a Central Committee meeting later in the month would confirm this. Importantly, he declared that the other satellite states should give him and the government of Czechoslovakia the courtesy of allowing them to handle their own internal affairs. The Hungarian leader was offended. The meeting ended badly and, of course, Kadar reported back to Moscow.



On 9 August Brezhnev had made the first of several telephone calls to Dubcek to warn him that, as far as he and the Politburo were concerned, the agreements made at Cierna were not being fulfilled. It was no more than Ulbricht and Kadar were later to suggest. The “forces of the Right” in Czechoslovakia were clearly holding back progress, Brezhnev said. Dubcek stalled, telling Brezhnev that he and the Czech Presidium were working on it.

On 13 August Brezhnev telephoned again. Such calls were not unusual but the message this time was far from reassuring for the Czech leader. The charitable view is that Brezhnev was making a last-ditch attempt to bring Dubcek back into the fold. The reality is that he was more than likely issuing a threat to terrify Dubcek, to warn him what was coming. After the usual pleasantries—Brezhnev addressing Dubcek as Alexander Stepanovich—he came straight to the point. He and the Politburo were concerned about the way newspapers and other elements of the media were depicting the recent conferences. These elements, as Brezhnev called them, were also increasing the strength of their attacks on what he then detailed as the healthy forces of communism: “What I am referring to here are not some isolated instances but an organized campaign, and judging by the content of the materials, these press organs have come to serve as a mouthpiece for the right wing, anti-socialist forces.”*



He went on to declare that Moscow considered this a violation of the agreements reached at Cierna and Bratislava. Dubcek protested and outlined again the measures he and the Presidium were taking to prevent anti-socialist and anti-Soviet outbursts in the media. He reiterated that it was not possible to achieve this in a day.

Brezhnev would have none of it, insisting that every day the Czech newspapers—*Literarni listy*, *Mlada fronta* and the rest—were full of anti-Soviet propaganda: “Over the past two or three days, the newspapers I mentioned have been doggedly continuing to occupy themselves with the publication of defamatory ravings about the Soviet Union and the other fraternal countries. My comrades on the Politburo insist that we make an urgent approach to you on this matter.”[†] There was an element of truth in Brezhnev’s accusations. In response to Dubcek’s plea made after the Bratislava meeting, the Czech papers had toned down their criticisms but editors were never going to totally forego their recently acquired freedom of speech. Criticism of the Soviet Union was there, muted perhaps, but still available to anyone who wished to look for it and interpret it—as the Novotny moles and the Soviets clearly did.

The threat to Czech sovereignty was obvious and the telephone conversation ended without any definite conclusion. Five days later, on 18 August, at a meeting in Moscow of the Soviets and the other main satellite states—‘the Five’—Brezhnev and the Politburo made the final decision that they had no alternative but to launch an invasion of Czechoslovakia. At the meeting Brezhnev declared to everyone that Alexander Dubcek had joined the “forces of the Right”. He claimed that Dubcek had agreed to reinstate censorship and outlaw the recently established Czech organizations for former political prisoners. Neither of these promises, he said, had been acted upon. It was not just a rewording of what had been decided at Bratislava but was an outright lie.



Like Ulbricht, Janos Kadar, the hardcore Hungarian communist, also visited Dubcek in August 1968. (Dutch National Archives)

The die was cast but still Dubcek and his colleagues continued with the business of running the country, none of them thinking, not for a moment, that the Soviets would ever dream of launching an invasion: the tanks and guns had ringed the country for so long now that almost everybody had either forgotten them or took their presence as the status quo.

In Prague students and youthful visitors continued to party with wild abandon. It was the height of summer and trips out into the countryside were common. Away from the heavy hedonism of the Czech capital, in the relaxed and shady groves of hilly woodlands, music and beer and sex and drugs were ubiquitous. Alongside the sudden explosion of youth culture, the previous twelve months had seen an amazing rebirth of grassroots organizations that had once been an essential part of Czech life. Sports clubs, women's groups, Boy Scouts and gymnastic clubs had, between the wars, given Czech society a unique dimension with huge emphasis on fitness and the outdoor life. These had withered and died in the 1940s and 1950s but now, suddenly and with renewed vigour, they were back. The walkers and hikers, the fitness fanatics and the lovers of nature blended easily with the 'children of the flower power generation', whose interests in the outdoor life were of an undoubtedly more carnal nature. It hardly mattered; there was room enough for everyone in this new and stimulating society. As a leader writer in *The New York Times* commented, "For those under 30, Prague seems the right place to be this summer."*



Newly elected prime minister, Oldrich Cernik, broke the news to Dubcek of the Soviet invasion.

Dubcek's main concerns in the latter part of August were preparations for the party congress that was due in September. He spent the night of Saturday, 17 August with his family at their house in Bratislava. It was good to get away from the rush and chaos of Prague. Dubcek, his wife Anna and their three sons always enjoyed their private moments. This particular weekend break was a moment's peace before the First Secretary returned to the rigours of preparing for the party congress and running the government. The family journeyed back to Prague late on the Sunday. On Monday 19 August, Dubcek was back into his familiar routine, busily preparing the agenda for a Presidium meeting that was due to be held the following day.

On the evening of 19 August, Dubcek's wife Anna was suddenly taken ill. Her gall bladder had been causing her problems for some time and on the Tuesday morning Dubcek felt that he had no option but to take her to hospital. Once Anna was settled in and receiving treatment the couple parted with Dubcek promising to visit her the following day.

That afternoon he had an important meeting with members of the Presidium. Held in the offices of the Central Committee, it was a meeting that he could not avoid. It began soon after 2 p.m., Dubcek hoping it would be a brief discussion, but the meeting dragged on into the evening with Soviet 'friends' Drahomir Kolder and Alois Indra spending much of the time on a revamped version of the Warsaw Letter.

Supper was then laid on, delegates eating as they listened and spoke without any break in the proceedings. All day there had been rumours about increased Soviet military activity on the borders and the mood of the meeting was tense.

Just before midnight the recently elected prime minister, Oldrich Cernik, was called to the phone. He returned, ashen-faced and sweating. The call had been from the defence minister, General Martin Dzur—the Soviets had invaded. The news was like a bombshell and for a moment everyone was stunned into total silence. It was what everyone had dreaded but never expected, the nightmare scenario of all their dreams. Then the panic-stricken voices of Czechoslovakia's leaders joined together in a frantic babble of sound.



General Dzur had been taken captive by the Soviet forces that had stormed into his office, pointing their machine guns at him. It would not have taken much, he believed, for them to have opened fire. The Soviets were now in possession of the defence ministry. Soviet troops, mainly Russian but heavily supported by other Warsaw Pact soldiers, were everywhere in the city. The main emotion in Prague and, as far as the government could tell, in other centres, was one of shock but so far there had been no opposition either from the Czech army or the Czech people. General Dzur had been allowed to make the telephone call purely as a matter of courtesy. He was no longer being held at gunpoint but the threat of further action remained.

As Dubcek and his colleagues tried to make sense of the news, more information began to pour in. The invasion had taken everyone—the Czech military, the government, the partying students and tourists—totally by surprise. One minute it had been the summer of love reborn, the next a military intervention that was so reminiscent of Hitler's power grabs of the late 1930s.



The experience of Anton Tazky, Secretary of the Slovak Party Central Committee and a close personal friend of Dubcek's, was typical. He soon passed on the story that, late on 20 August, he had been driving home from a meeting in Banska Bystrica. When he reached Bratislava he found the city to be a hive of activity; he suddenly saw strange lights gleaming through the darkness. These lights, it soon transpired, were from trucks and from tanks manned by soldiers in unusual uniforms that he did not recognize. The strange soldiers had come from the south, from Hungary. Tazky shrugged and told himself not to worry: they were obviously shooting a movie. He arrived home, went to bed and was woken ten minutes later with the news. "The Russians are here."^{*}

^{*} Dubcek, p. 170.

^{*} Brezhnev–Dubcek telephone call, quoted in Hanhimaki & Westad, p. 259

[†] Ibid., p. 261.

^{*} Quoted in Kurlansky, p. 250.

^{*} Dubcek, p. 173.

7. INVASION!

During the small hours of 20/21 August 1968, as the city of Prague and the country slept silently in the warm darkness of an Eastern European summer night, the Soviet Union effectively and efficiently deployed 165,000 troops and 4,600 tanks into the state of Czechoslovakia. They came, in the main, from the Soviet Union but there were also significant numbers of troops from the four main Soviet satellites: East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Bulgaria.

The exercise was termed Operation Danube. Troops poured across the Czech border via twenty different crossing points. They came from southern Poland, from northern Hungary and from East Germany. Within a week the initial invasion force had grown to 500,000 men and 6,000 tanks.

It was hardly a relief for Alexander Dubcek but he had lived for so long with halftruths, with the fear of Soviet action mingling and merging with periods of sublime joy at the success of the Prague Spring, that it would have been inhuman not to enjoy an inevitable, albeit brief, easing of indecision. The issue was at least settled and he now knew exactly where he stood: the Soviet Union had invaded his country. As he was later to write: "I had been inclined to blame the Soviets' hostility towards our reforms on their different cultural environment and historic experience rather than on a premeditated rejection of reform ... It took the drastic, practical experience of the coming days and months for me to understand that I was in fact dealing with gangsters."*

Only with the invasion came the understanding that he and the rest of the Presidium were not dealing with civilized intellectuals and decent politicians. They were dealing with men who would stop at nothing to achieve their desires and maintain the status quo behind the Iron Curtain.

Once Dubcek and Cernik had managed to restore order to the Presidium, the first matter to discuss was what to do next. While there would have to be resistance to the Soviet invasion, it was also imperative that needless bloodshed and suffering had to be avoided. Military resistance was futile. It was already too late and, besides, Czech defences were directed toward the country's western border where it had always been expected that any attack, if it ever came, would be from West Germany.

If physical or military resistance were to be ruled out it was still important that the government should issue a formal statement detailing exactly what had happened and what the government response was going to be. A declaration from the Presidium was duly drafted and, addressed to all the people of Czechoslovakia. It was quickly released: “Yesterday, August 20, 1968, around 11 p.m., the armies of the Soviet Union, of the Polish People’s Republic, of the German Democratic Republic, the Hungarian People’s Republic and the Bulgarian People’s Republic crossed the borders of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. It happened without the knowledge of the President of the Republic, of the Chairman of the National Assembly, of the Prime Minister and of the First Secretary of the Central Committee of CPZ, and of all these organs.”*



Leonid Brezhnev warmly greets East Germany's Walter Ulbricht, Moscow, June 1969. Nikolai Podgorny, politburo heavyweight, is just back of Brezhnev. (Peter Koard / Bundesarchiv Bild 183)

The declaration went on to request that all Czech citizens remain calm. They were not to resist the invading troops and not provoke them in any way. All leading officials of the Czech state were at their posts and attempting to deal with what was clearly an illegal act on the part of the Soviets. The declaration was read over the air from Radio Prague just a day later.

The Soviet Union had already sent out its own announcement, through the Tass News Agency, informing the world that the invasion had been launched at the request of certain patriots within the Czech government and communist party. Even to the most rabid Soviet supporters it was a clear lie and Dubcek's declaration was a counter-measure to this.

The Presidium meeting finished at two in the morning, the president, prime minister and several other officials leaving for their offices in Hradcany Castle and the various seats of government. Dubcek began to plan for the Fourteenth Party Congress which would give official sanction to his reforms. He was convinced the congress must go ahead. He was frightened, however, that if the Soviets got wind of the meeting the delegates would be immediately arrested and shot. Therefore the congress would have to be organized and held in secret.



Josef Koudelka, the intrepid cameraman whose work did much to publicize the uprising. (Gorup de Besanez)

For two hours, as Dubcek worked and fretted, the air above Prague was filled by the roar of aircraft engines, one plane a minute landing at Prague's Ruzyně Airport, bringing in more troops and materiel, but for the moment no Warsaw Pact troops had appeared anywhere near the Central Committee building. For a while Dubcek considered going into hiding and from there founding and leading a resistance movement. In the end he decided against it, believing that such a move would simply contradict the government's earlier decision to offer only political resistance. He knew that sooner or later the Soviet invasion would result in his arrest, possibly even his execution, but he was determined to do his duty, to follow his star wherever it might lead.

As he paced the corridors of the Central Committee building, pondering his next move, a crowd of several thousand people—most of them young—gathered on the embankment outside. They sang and chanted, calling for Dubcek, and waved homemade flags in the air. The night began to dissolve into daylight but the crowd stayed, not wanting to go home.

It was after 4 a.m. before a convoy of tanks and other armoured vehicles rumbled slowly across the Hlavka Bridge, heading toward the Central Committee building. Inevitably it was only a matter of time before there was a clash between the troops and the crowd still thronging the streets around the Central Committee building. It was not long in coming. To everyone's horror the Soviet troops opened fire when the protesters did not move out of the way quickly enough. One civilian was killed, the rest of the crowd scattered and within minutes Soviet paratroopers had surrounded the building.

Groups of soldiers immediately rushed the unguarded offices and before anyone knew what was happening, the telephone lines were cut. Dubcek found himself with a Soviet machine gun pointed at the back of his head. When he made a move toward the telephone on his desk a soldier grabbed it, tore the cable from its socket and hurled the phone to the floor. There was no doubt about it—he was under arrest. This was confirmed when a Soviet officer proclaimed that he was being taken into custody in the name of the Workers' and Peasants' Government. The new leader of the government was to be Alois Indra, Comrade Indra as the Soviet officer termed him. Dubcek and the other members of the previous government would soon be brought before a revolutionary tribunal, again chaired by 'Comrade Indra', and dealt with accordingly. The traitor in the pack had been revealed.

After that announcement the members of the Presidium were left, each with an armed guard at his shoulder, to consider their fate. It might have been a deliberate ploy but somehow Dubcek did not think so. His bet was that things were not going quite

according to plan and that, having now got the Czech government under their control, the Soviets did not know what to do with them. He and those members of the government still in the building were held for several hours before finally being taken outside and shoved into an armoured personnel carrier. Dubcek knew that there were only two possible destinations: jail or airport. Jail would probably have meant instant death; the airport at least gave some guarantee of survival—at least for a while.



Josef Smrkovsky, the popular Czech leader of the National Assembly. This photo was taken in 1945.

It was the airport. There Dubcek and the others were joined by Prime Minister Cernik and after more pointless waiting that indicated the Soviets were still bemused and unsure what to do next, the men were loaded onto a Russian aeroplane. They sat silently, and changed planes before eventually taking off. Several hours later the aircraft landed in the Ukraine where the prisoners were immediately handed over to KGB officers.



By Thursday 22 August, the Czech politicians were being held in a mountaintop complex of chalets and holiday homes. In contrast to their earlier experiences—Cernik had been manhandled and everyone roughly pushed about—they were now being treated in a civil, almost polite manner. They were, however, totally isolated and none knew what was going on back in Czechoslovakia. The isolation continued when, a day or so later, Dubcek was taken from his room, given a pair of dark glasses and bundled into a waiting car. He never understood the reason for the dark glasses and considered them a childish piece of theatre but they stayed in place until the car reached its destination. They drove for an hour before they arrived at the offices of the Regional Soviet Party Committee. Dubcek was handed a telephone and spoke to Nikolai Podgorny, one of Brezhnev's henchmen, who informed him he was to be taken to Moscow. There, at the Kremlin, they would have to talk.

Back in Prague confusion reigned. The invading troops had orders not to open fire unless fired on by the Czechs. However, the majority of these Warsaw Pact soldiers were young and inexperienced, men of peasant stock and, in the main, of limited intelligence. Mistakes were almost certainly bound to happen. To begin with the crowds of protesters, most of them younger than the invading Soviets and many not even out of their teens, attempted to stop the tanks by sitting in the road in front of them. If they had the time and if they could lay their hands on the materials, they built barricades. Park benches, rubbish bins, old cars, even hijacked buses, were their stock in trade. It did not take the youngsters long to appreciate that barricades, however big and strong, were never going to be enough and that tanks could easily and effectively run over anything—even a body—that was put in their way.



The students also quickly realized that Radio Prague was a crucial target for the Soviets and many of them rushed to defend what soon became the symbol of Czech resistance. They got to the radio station on Vinohradska, at the back of the city museum, ahead of the tanks and lay down in serried ranks across the roadway, effectively blocking the entry. The tanks rumbled to a reluctant halt, their turrets swivelling as the crews peered hesitantly out of the hatches: “There is noise from beyond the museum, the sound of metal, the rattle of machine gun fire The transistor radio on the ground nearby is broadcasting the same sound ... the studio is under attack and may be invaded but for the moment the staff will continue broadcasting the news as long as possible. When you hear unfamiliar voices on the radio, the announcer says, do not believe them.”*



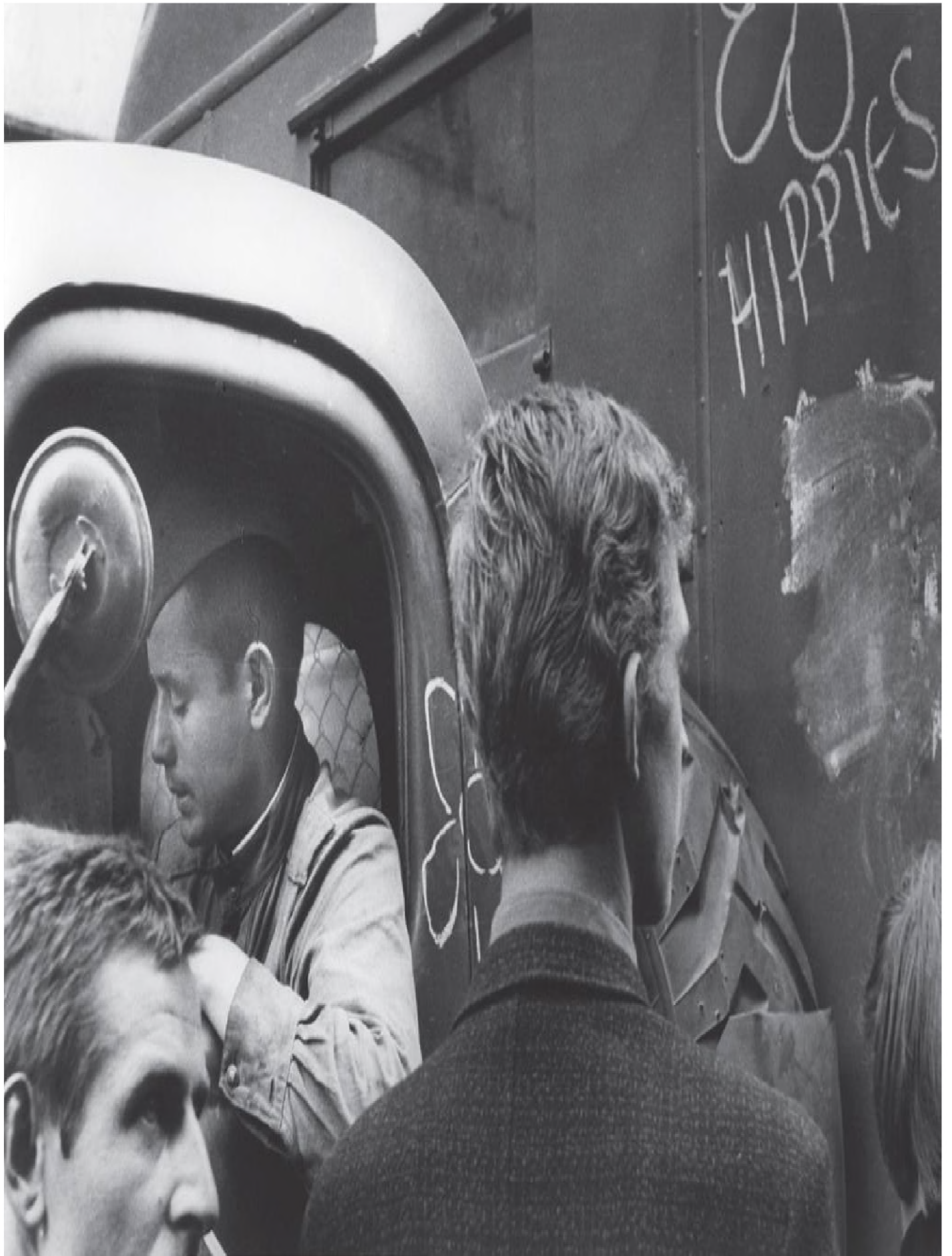
A Soviet armoured scout car BRDM-1 during the invasion, August 1968. (Frantisek Dostal)

The Czech protesters began to hurl questions at the Soviet tank crews: why are you here, what do you think you are doing? By now the tension was palpable. Then the soldiers, without orders, suddenly opened fire. At first they shot over the heads of the crowd but when that proved ineffective they aimed directly at the protesters. Dozens fell wounded, several died.

The Czechs retaliated with Molotov cocktails and one or two of the tanks were soon engulfed in flames. Bullets ricocheted off the museum walls and the street was enveloped by thick grey smoke. With Radio Prague still broadcasting and despite the casualties, there was almost a festive atmosphere on the streets: this was what student protest was all about!

And then the radio station suddenly announced that when the Czech national anthem was heard over the air waves it would all be over, the station would have been captured. Right on cue the anthem began to toll out. Only the first few bars were played before Radio Prague went silent.

All over Czechoslovakia there were similar demonstrations. In Bratislava young girls taunted the invading soldiers, distracting them by willingly showing their legs—and more—while boys and young men slipped up to Soviet vehicles to smash headlights. Five protesters were killed as they threw Molotov cocktails at the tanks.



Graffiti daubed onto a Soviet lorry. The driver does not appear overly concerned. (Frantisek Dostal)

Graffiti began to spout once more, massive, potent messages that appeared overnight. Now it was not clever or intellectual; now it was straightforward, leaving no one in any doubt about the feelings of the people: “Ivan Go Home!”, “This is not Vietnam”, “The Russian National Circus has arrived, complete with performing gorillas”.*

Informal but heated dialogue between Czechs and the Soviet invaders continued. Tanks surrounded by Czech ‘interrogators’ became a common sight in Prague—had there been any foreigners to witness it. In the wake of the invasion the thousands of tourists who had been happily enjoying the Prague Spring and its successor, the Prague Summer, hurriedly packed their bags and headed for the border. In the five days after 21 August over 5,000 American visitors left the country, none wishing to be caught in the political and military crossfire. The borders were closed and only those with diplomatic immunity or foreign passports were allowed out.

Before it was put off the air Czechoslovakian Television managed to send out film to the western world, showing some of the things happening during the invasion. With pictures of youths sitting in the path of rampant tanks, the footage clearly gave the lie to Soviet claims that they had entered the country at the request of the Czechs and were being welcomed with open arms.

Over the next few weeks cameraman Josef Koudelka filmed events as they occurred, using film cut from the end of exposed newsreels. These shots, virtually homemade cine films, were then smuggled out of the country and passed on to various news outlets in the West. In order to protect him and his family—Koudelka found safety in Britain in 1970 but his family remained in Czechoslovakia—Koudelka was credited simply as ‘A Prague photographer’. The films provided intimate, vivid details of what was going on in Czechoslovakia, from the heated debates with tank crews to the ‘sit in’ protests in front of armoured vehicles.

Protest reached a new high as the youth of Czechoslovakia began to realize they were not alone in their opposition to the Soviets. Street signs were removed, direction markers turned the wrong way, images such as swastikas were painted onto Soviet tanks, and if all else failed there was always the Molotov cocktail or a burning rag stuffed into the fuel tank of a passing Soviet vehicle.

The Soviet Union had badly miscalculated the determination of Czech opposition. Brezhnev had intended the invasion to be presented as a liberation of the Czech people. But rather than printing images of the new pro-Soviet Czech government welcoming the troops, magazines and newspapers across the world had found an infinitely better story.



The photographs that excited the interest of people everywhere were of young, unarmed Czechs, men and women alike, standing in front of Soviet tanks, waving or wrapping themselves in Czech flags and singing songs of freedom and protest. Molotov cocktails exploding against tank hulls may not have done much structural damage but photographs that showed it happening were especially prized.

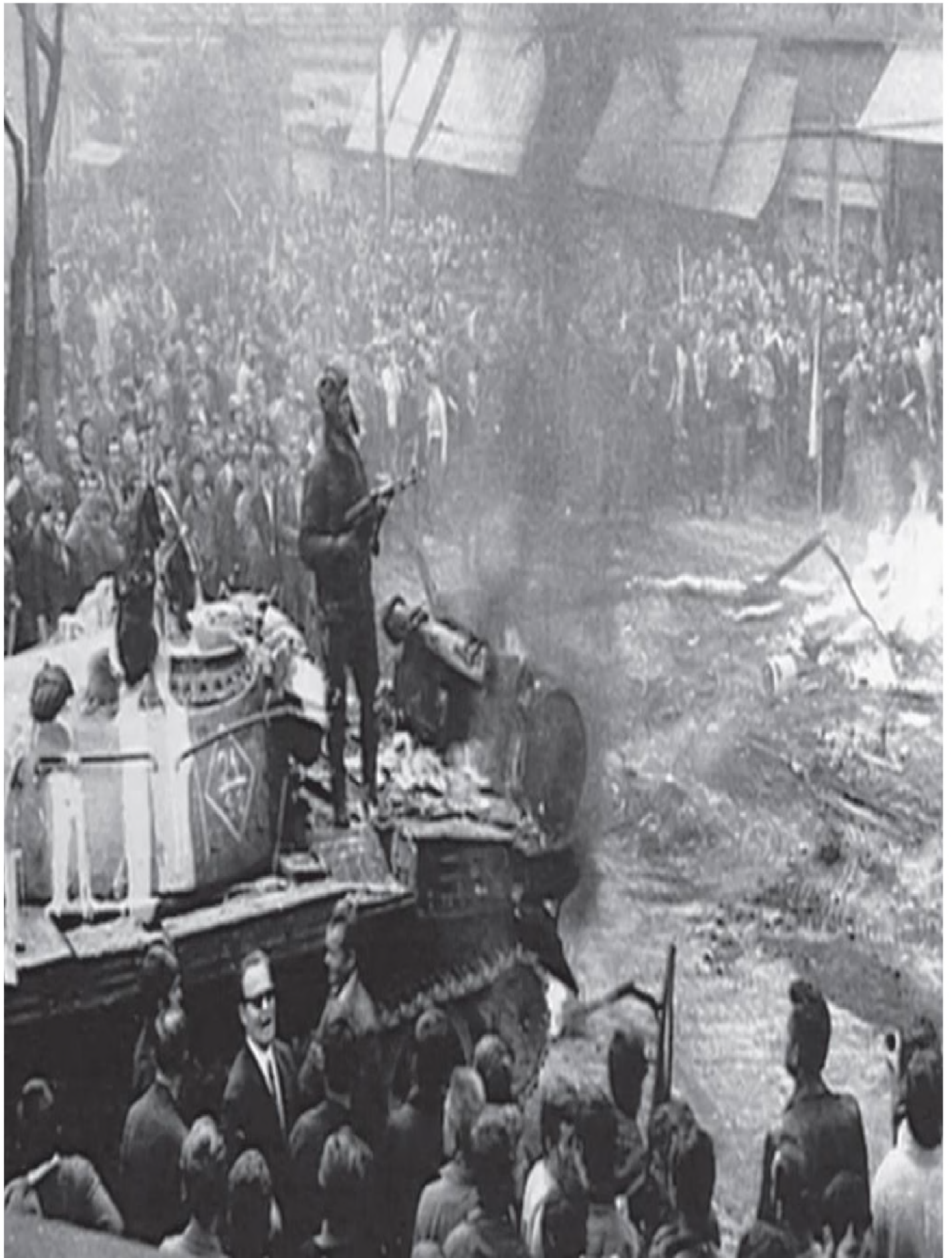
The invading soldiers and their puppet masters back in Moscow began to realize that the Czechs—and it seemed the rest of the world too—believed implicitly what Dubcek, Cernik and Svoboda told them. It should hardly have come as a surprise but for some reason the Soviets, believing implicitly that their way was the only way, found themselves on the back foot. When the voices of the Czech leaders were backed up by powerful visual images it became clear that while the Soviets might control the military situation, they certainly did not control the hearts and the minds of the people.

Radio Prague might have been shut down but almost immediately underground radio stations, operating out of cellars and old warehouses, took up the baton of freedom. Many of the announcers and engineers were the same people who had run Radio Prague and their expertise was essential if the Czech people were to be kept informed. It was, as far as the Soviets were concerned, totally illegal and they made locating and closing down the underground radio stations something of a priority. Such was the importance of the stations to the Czechs that one official in the ministry of the interior actually committed suicide rather than reveal where the stations were located. It was through these underground stations that the Czech people learned of the support for their position from outside the country. They also learned that the Soviet announcement that Slovakia had defected was nothing more than a lie. Radio stations were bolstered and supported by underground newspapers, little more than hastily printed sheets of cheap paper but they were produced, handed out on the streets and read by the people.

The underground radio stations continued to broadcast, reporting on the men and women who had been detained and even on the troop movements of the invading armies. More people listened to these illicit broadcasts than had ever tuned in to Radio Prague—and this in an age when the radio, particularly in Iron Curtain countries like Czechoslovakia, was a medium that united everyone from the humblest clerk and shop girl to the political leaders of the nation. The underground system was, in its own way, as effective as the broadcasts of the Free French during the Second World War and gave all Czech citizens hope that resistance was still alive. The slogan of the free stations was, “We are with you; be with us.” Vaclav Havel was one who broadcast to the nation on the underground network, asking for western writers and artists to pledge their

support, and hoping that his voice would be heard, not just in Czechoslovakia but across the border in West Germany and Austria as well.

Meanwhile the Soviets attempted to set up their own underground radio system to combat that of the Czech partisans. It failed because they could not find an announcer who spoke fluent Czech and Slovak.



A Soviet tank commander with his AK-47 at the ready after his tank has been set ablaze by Czech protesters.
(Frantisek Dostal)

With Alexander Dubcek and the leaders of the previous Czechoslovak government still incarcerated somewhere in the Ukraine, the Soviet Union turned to what was clearly the last possible trump in their hands—Ludvik Svoboda, the 73-year-old president of Czechoslovakia: “Svoboda was not a politician but an old soldier through and through. His main concern was to avoid bloodshed between an unarmed populace and the army of occupation. He felt that something had to be done fast.”*

Threatened by the Soviets, pressurized to accept the new regime and denounce Dubcek’s reforms, Svoboda retaliated with a threat of his own: he would commit suicide if they persisted in their demands. Instinctively the Soviets knew that this was no idle promise. A dead president was the last thing they needed so they resorted to bribery and promises of benefits that could be gained—both for him personally and for the country—if he would only cooperate.

They clearly did not know their man. Svoboda was unmoved. All he wanted was for Dubcek, Cernik and the others to be released from what he assumed was KGB custody and taken to Moscow where a negotiated settlement could be discussed and drawn up. Svoboda was no great supporter of Dubcek’s reforms and was, if anything, a reactionary. But he was an honourable man whose courageous stance now brought the Soviets up short and denied legitimacy to their invasion. As he later told Dubcek, he would rather have shot himself than pledge allegiance to what would be little more than a junta led by Alois Indra.



Whatever the Soviets thought of Svoboda, they knew, instinctively, that he was being straight when he spoke about Indra. They listened and knew that there was no way the two men could ever work together. More importantly, the Soviets knew that their bluff had been called and reluctantly agreed to move the Czech leaders to Moscow. Included in the group were Svoboda, Cernik and the hugely popular Josef Smrkovsky, leader of the National Assembly. The appearance of the Czech politicians made it clear that all of them had been through an ordeal: they were pale and haggard, faces drawn and strained, and dressed in clothes that were rumpled and looked as if they had been slept in for some time. Dubcek looked particularly exhausted, with a cut across his forehead, said to be the result of a fall in the bathroom. During his time in Moscow he was continually on medication and often stammered. Several times he had to retire from meetings to lie down and rest. But the Czech leaders were now, at last, in Moscow. And there, in the Kremlin, Svoboda's long-hoped-for discussion on the future could now take place.

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- * Dubcek, p. 178.
 - * Kurlansky, p. 292.
 - * Mawer, p. 333.
 - * Quoted in Kurlansky, p. 293.
 - * Dubcek, p. 188.

8. IN VIEW OF THE WORLD

The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was denounced by most western nations and, in a move that was particularly galling for Moscow, it was also condemned by the majority of western communist parties. Support from the 'communist brotherhood' might have been expected, verbally at least. It was not to be. In 1968 there were eighty-eight communist parties in the world but only ten of them approved of the invasion. Included in the ten were Fidel Castro from Cuba, the mysterious men from North Korea and, as might be expected, the North Vietnamese. The Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia was, said Castro, unfortunate but inevitable.

Even in Russia there were protests with a small band of dissenters staging a sitdown demonstration in Red Square. They carried banners that screamed "Hands off Czechoslovakia"—poet Natalya Gorbanevskaya transported them to Red Square in a pram that also carried her baby—and distributed leaflets to those who would take them. It was a peaceful protest, well-organized and -conducted but the protesters were, of course, soon arrested.



The Russian dissident Natalya Gorbanevskaya—seen here in later years—wrote movingly about the invasion. (Ondrej Lipar)

The United Nations immediately condemned the Soviet actions in Czechoslovakia but it was a toothless protest. The Soviet Union, cynically but obviously, used their veto to ride roughshod over the motion. That left condemnation of the Soviets and their actions in the hands of individual statesmen and leaders.

As might have been expected, despite his communist affiliations, President Tito of Yugoslavia was openly critical of the Soviet actions. There were demonstrations and parades through the centre of Belgrade, again led mainly by the young. President Ceausescu of Romania also openly disagreed with Brezhnev's operation, calling the invasion a dreadful mistake.

Harold Wilson, Labour prime minister of Britain, was among the first to condemn the invasion. Wilson, like all the British, had fond memories of the Czech fighter pilots and soldiers who had escaped Nazi-controlled Europe and made their way to England where they had fought valiantly for five years against the German oppression. Nostalgia had no place in the politics of the 1960s but now Czechoslovakia was once more staring into the gun barrel of dictatorship. After the joy and enthusiasm of the Prague Spring, Wilson and other British politicians found the recent events particularly galling.

France's General de Gaulle also denounced the invasion but rather than simply condemn the affair, he chose to compare it to the recent US invasion of the Dominican Republic. The old warhorse was attempting to make political capital out of the whole business and put himself—and his country—between the US and the Soviet Union, a position from where he might be able to influence world history. France, her dying colonies and the French people were always far more important to de Gaulle than some distant part of Eastern Europe.

In the United States there was criticism but it was not quite as vibrant as many had expected or hoped. President Lyndon Johnson had his own agenda and was clear that progress was being made in improving US–Soviet relationships. He would announce his disapproval of the invasion but would do nothing to rock the boat of détente. American politicians like Senator Eugene McCarthy, he of 'witch hunt' fame, and future president Richard Nixon had built their careers on the base of almost fanatical anti-communist programmes; over recent months they had been forced to redefine their views as the Soviet Union appeared to relax its aggressive stance. Nevertheless President Johnson did make a stance of sorts. The invasion was, he declared, "a clear violation of the United Nations Charter" with the Soviet excuses for intervention being "patently contrived". He then went on: "It is a sad commentary on the communist mind that a sign of liberty in Czechoslovakia is deemed a fundamental threat to the security of the Soviet

system.”* His statement stopped short of outright condemnation but it was enough to make the Soviet Union pause before making its next move.

The story of the Prague Spring and, perhaps more cogently, its crushing by the forces of the Soviet Union and its satellite allies also affected ordinary men and women. Once again the dark forces of ‘the East’ appeared to be gathering and the fears that it engendered were symptomatic of the time and that stage of the Cold War. Perhaps it was not the threat to world peace that the Cuban Missile Crisis had caused six years before but it was still a significant and disturbing moment, particularly in light of the recent easing of tensions between the main players in the political game.

Many people had felt that the Cold War was ending or at least slowing down. That might have been more wishful thinking than hard reality but it was certainly a feeling that was widespread in 1967 and 1968. Whatever its origins, it was a false dawn. The Soviet invasion of another sovereign state was proof positive that Moscow’s ambitions were still as powerful as ever.

Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the best-known Russian poet of the age, sent a missive to Brezhnev at the Kremlin, with copies to the newspapers in the West. In it he condemned the invasion and predicted that it would be disastrous for other communist regimes across the world. Soviet prestige had been, he declared, immediately lowered by the invasion, thereby providing an unexpected gift for reactionary forces at work in the world.

Yevtushenko was not alone. On student campuses, in coffee bars, in pavement cafés and in bed-sit attics in countries like Britain, France, West Germany and the US, more poetry was being written than at almost any other stage in history. Poetry, whether good, bad or indifferent, demands the heights or the depths of emotion and the events of the Prague Spring certainly provided this. Much of the poetry produced in the post-invasion months was turgid in the extreme but it was heartfelt and some of it found an outlet in the hundreds of underground or small-press magazines that were soon being pumped out. The emergence—perhaps re-emergence—of broad-sheet poetry, along with poetry readings and student sit-ins, sums up much of the atmosphere of the time. The ‘creative arts scene’ was urgent and fertile and although it was never likely to change the world, it was at least alive. Young men and women were beginning to realize that with dextrous use of the inky duplicators that were the early forerunners of modern photocopiers, almost anyone could be a publisher. And in the case of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia it was more the emotion than the poetic quality of the verse that counted. Most established writers and artists responded to Vaclav Havel’s appeal for support—moral if nothing else. Poets as diverse and influential as Britain’s Tony Harrison, Czech writer Miroslav Holub and the Russian dissident Natalya Gorbanevskaya all wrote

movingly about the invasion. Perhaps the most striking of them is Holub's *Casualty*, a poem written from first-hand experience of working in hospitals during the Soviet occupation:

They bring us crushed fingers,

mend it, doctor.

They bring burnt-out eyes,



Ceausescu's government sharply opposed the occupation of Czechoslovakia. Here the Romanian communist party officially denounces it. (Cota: 175/1968 / Romanian National Archives)

hounded owls of hearts,
they bring a hundred white bodies,
a hundred red bodies,
a hundred black bodies,
*mend it, doctor.**

Not all of the Prague poems were as well-crafted as Holub's effort. But they were all driven by the same emotion: a desire to condemn the Soviet action.

Many of those who witnessed the arrival of the tanks have never been able to forget the sights and sounds of that haunting summer. Even for those who saw the events from a safe distance, from Britain or America, anywhere west of the Iron Curtain, the images remain fixed in their minds. And what they represent is a crushing of independence, a smashing of dignity and the imposition of alien ideas by tactics that were worthy of the biggest bully in the school playground. For some it was the scenes of desperate resistance in the city of Prague that they remember, for others the impassive faces of the Soviet tank crews as they faced the screaming crowds. However they remember it, whatever they recollect, whether it is from first-hand experience or through the media, the images will not go away, even now, more than fifty years after the events. Perhaps it is time for some of those recollections to be shared:

I was in school in West Wales, preparing to sit my O' levels when news of the Prague Spring first found its way into my consciousness. My friends and I, we'd sit on the grass of the playing fields at lunch time—it was lovely spring weather, I remember—and discuss it. Of course we found it dead romantic, all the music and the flowers, people dancing in the streets. It was exciting, breaking down or dismantling the Communist Bloc—because that's what we all thought we were witnessing. Saying it now it sounds silly but we even talked about going to Czechoslovakia, to Prague, to experience what was happening. It wasn't that we thought we could do anything to help or speed things up but we just wanted to be a part of it all. Of course, it was all hot air. We had no money and our parents would have gone ballistic at the mention of the idea. I didn't even have a passport but the memory of those conversations has always stayed with me. I suppose it meant that the Prague Spring, rather than the Russian invasion that ended it all, was what made the most impression on a naïve 15-year-old girl. Romantic, I guess.

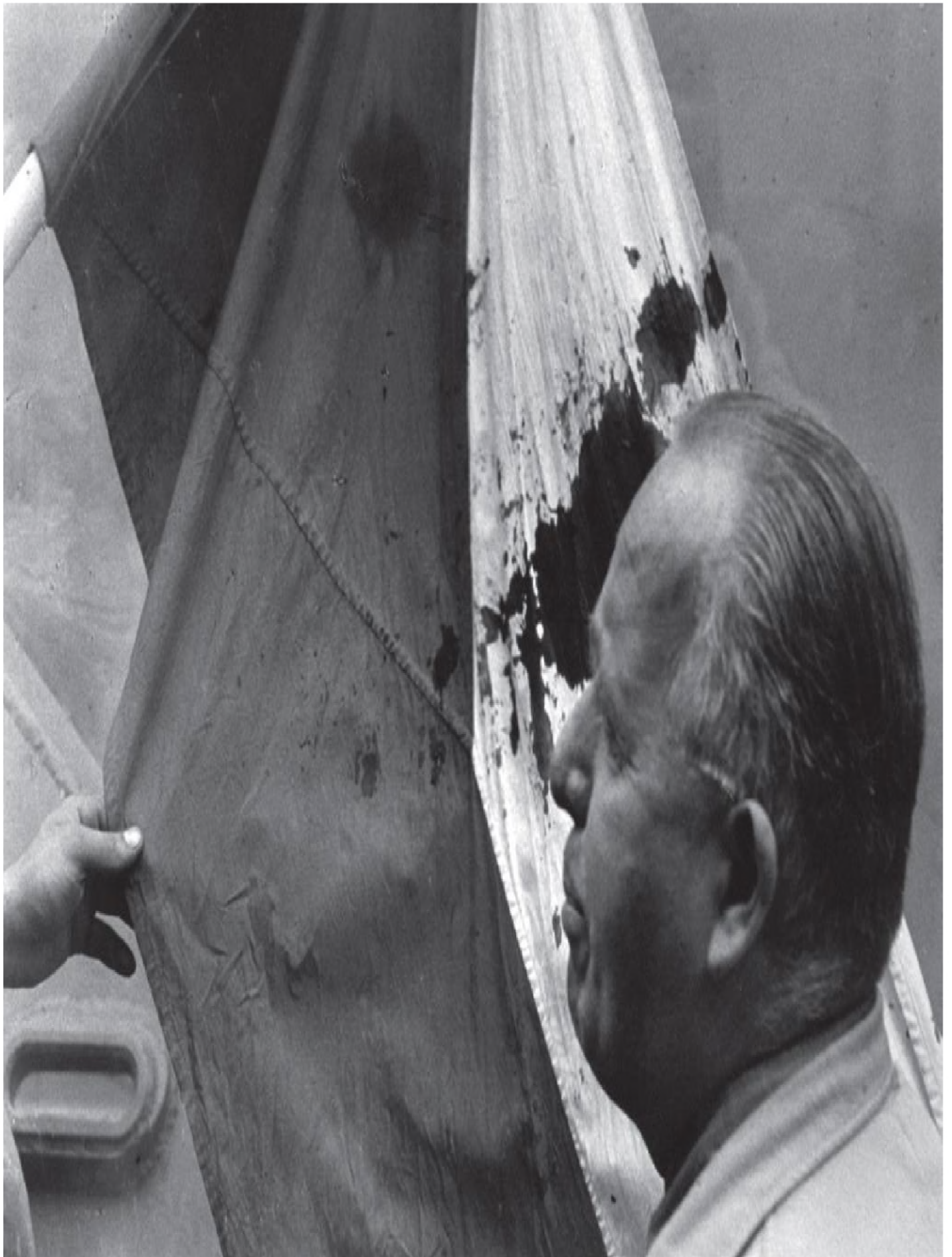
Anne Hughes (Bridgend)

I was at university in Aberystwyth when the Prague Spring happened. Happened is a good word because it was the time of ‘happenings’ and the growth of youth culture. We were all young, all very left wing in our thinking in those days, and so we were delighted at the thought of people breaking the shackles of government dictates. I think it was, for us, the first crack in the Russian façade, that powerful and frightening barrier that kept them separate and distant. If the Czechs could introduce reforms like this, we thought, who knew what other Warsaw Pact countries might do.

John Woods (Llantwit Major)

Of course I remember the Prague Spring but Prague was behind the Iron Curtain. It was a foreign, distant land. That Iron Curtain was like a real barrier, a real wall across Europe. In those days there was no social media, not like we have today. There were one or two television channels and the radio but really you had to wait for the daily papers to arrive to find out what was going on in the rest of the world. We knew it was a big thing when the Russians went in—that’s what I remember, the invasion rather than Dubcek’s reforms. Most of us, me included, well, we didn’t know what he was reforming, what Czechoslovakia was like before or after. So yes, it was a big thing, we knew that, but it was distant. It was all happening a long way away and it didn’t really relate to us.

Jaci Parsons (Cowbridge)



A blood-soaked Czech flag that epitomized the resistance. (Frantisek Dostal)

The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was perhaps the most significant Cold War event since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 or President Kennedy's later assassination, both of which had rocked the world some years before. It was dangerous and yet distant enough to be 'out of reach' for most individuals but it still managed to enthrall people from all over the world, confirming preconceptions and bringing home the continuing menace of the Cold War. For some it was an awakening, a realization that the world was a dangerous place where individual dreams and desires could be quickly and easily destroyed:

The crushing of the Prague Spring was, I suppose, something of a seminal moment for me. It was, you could say, my political awakening. Up until that August all I'd been interested in was rugby—and, I suppose, girls. I was living with my parents in Penarth, close to Cardiff, and as a teenager the whole world was there in front of me. But the Soviet invasion of 1968, well, that made me realize that there were people out there who were going through all sorts of pain and terror, things I'd never even thought about. I suddenly realized that politics, international politics anyway, wasn't about kissing babies and making speeches. It was about people. As I say, the Prague Spring—my political awakening.

Bruce Wallace (Bancyfellyn, West Wales)

I was 6 years old at the time of the invasion, living in Radzyn Podlaski in Poland. I can still remember the roar of the tanks—Polish tanks—as they started up their engines and left for Czechoslovakia. I can't say I was frightened. I was, as I say, only 6 and it was exciting, hearing those tanks rumble into life. I suppose it was a bit of an adventure. I remember standing at our garden fence and watching the lorries, tanks and troops through a hole in the wood. The convoy—because that was what it was—seemed to go on forever. Of course at the time I had no idea where they were going. Only later, much later, did I realize that what I was watching was the end of the Prague Spring.

Barbara Irwin (Poland, now UK)

We lived at Vinohrady, not far from the radio station. If I close my eyes I can still hear the voices assuring us that they would not give up their posts ... It was more or less symbolic, the last bastion of the country still in Czech hands.

Vera (formerly Czechoslovakia, now Australia, on local-life website)

I was standing on top of the Comenius University and there were maybe a couple of thousand people burning this huge canvas ... I went inside and as soon as I was inside I saw them. They were carrying this boy of about 20 and he was ... all over his stomach was blood and everything. It was just terrible.

Anon (on [upi.com](https://www.upi.com))

The suffering of the Czechs who tried to resist the Soviet tanks was captured on film by men like Josef Koudelka. His images brought home the brutal nature of the invasion and garnered sympathy from a worldwide audience. And yet there was also the effect that the events were having on the invaders—not the politicians and generals who were above such matters but the young and still relatively innocent boys who manned the tanks and armoured cars in the towns and cities of what was now a defiled and beaten country:

I watched these young confused faces. I realized they had no idea where they are [sic], why they are here. They were told of course that they had to crush the counter-revolution, but they were at such a loss.

Ivana Dolezalova (Czechoslovakia)

I still remember people going up to the tanks and talking to the soldiers who did not even know where they were. They were saying, “This is a terrible mistake. What are you doing here? Why did you come?”

Jiri Pehe (later political advisor to Vaclav Havel)

There were marches, protest marches, like there always are. But it was the television pictures of the tanks rolling across the border into Czechoslovakia or trundling into Wenceslas Square that hit home. And then, of course, later there was Jan Pallach. That really frightened us, somebody actually setting fire to themselves as a protest. We could hardly believe anyone would do that to themselves.



Warsaw Pact tanks on the streets of Prague, in stark contrast to trendily dressed woman in the foreground. (Frantisek Dostal)

Betty Alden (Cowbridge)

I remember the Prague Spring but only distantly. It was my last year at university and I remember seeing TV pictures of students in Wenceslas Square. I remember seeing lots of tanks and soldiers all looking very stern. But the most significant memory I've got comes from later, much later. I went on holiday to Prague and our guide, a young girl who was very well informed, told us this. I don't know if it's true but this is what she said. On the hills outside the city there were dozens of masts, TV masts, I suppose. When the Russians went in that August in 1968 all the masts were turned inward, towards Prague, so that nothing could be beamed outward, sent to the outside world. Whether or not that's true I don't know but it seemed like the sort of thing the invading Soviets would do.

Jan MacCallum (Glynneath)

Looking back it is now easy to see what the Soviet leaders saw at the time. Driven by an ideology that was—and is—beyond the comprehension of most people in the West, more than anything else they were afraid. They could never have acknowledged that fear but, by their actions in attempting to contain the emotion, they did little more than expose the limitations of the regime behind the Iron Curtain:

Liberalization could spread to their countries and instigate rebellion ... which would eventually oust the current leadership from power (and there's nothing politicians fear more than losing power).

Anna Spysz (on local-life website)

By occupying Czechoslovakia they have, in effect, announced that the Soviet system is so vulnerable that it cannot allow free speech and so brittle that it dare not permit experiment.

Anon (The Observer Archive, August 1968)

For Western observers it was important to maintain a sense of perspective. The ability to laugh at the craziness of the situation was hugely important. Marc Galante was a US Foreign Service officer in Czechoslovakia, some years after the actual invasion, but his memories sum up the general attitude of many foreign diplomats, reporters and officials:

Once when I complained to the regional shrink at an embassy cocktail party that the Czech not-so-secret police were following me wherever I went, he looked at me with a puzzled expression and said, “But Marc, it’s only paranoia if you’re NOT being followed.”

Marc Galante (USA)

And afterward when the protesting students had been reluctantly forced to admit defeat and had accepted Soviet occupation, the sense of unreality and defeat remained. For those who saw life in the Czech capital in the years before the downfall of the USSR it remained a memorable if not entirely pleasant experience:

I visited Czechoslovakia in 1970. Russian troops were everywhere. There were no people on the streets of Prague, it was a gray, empty city ... Old Town Square was deserted. People were frightened, suspicious and defeated.

P. Chalmers (Canada, on local-life website)

Between ’85 and ’89 I was there a dozen times and I can tell you that anyone who thinks that the Soviets conducted a ‘benevolent occupation’ is out of his mind. Besides the warmth and the intelligence of the Czech people, what struck me more than anything else was the feeling of hopelessness that the population seemed to share. The lack of essentials was so stark and obvious that unless you were completely oblivious or brain dead, you realized immediately that a communist economy simply didn’t work. I remember walking through Old Town Square and seeing a line of people, 3 or 4 abreast, carrying string bags. I followed the line as it wound around the block and it eventually ended at a mid-size supermarket where there was literally nothing on most of the shelves—except for the finger-long green bananas that had just arrived from Cuba. Everyone was entitled to buy two of them.

Marc Galante (USA)

Żołnierzy Polski!

Sz szczególnie od godziny 19. do 5.:

NIE STRELAJCIE

DO NASZYCH DZIECIAKÓW

I DO NAS WSZYSTKICH!!!

Polaci, niejesteście przecież Rosjanie!

Dziękujemy wam!

Obywatele miasta

Dvora Králové n. L.

- 23. 8. 1968.

A poster at the entrance to the National Museum that pleads: “Polish soldiers, especially from the hours 19 to 5: Do not shoot at our kids and us all!” (Beax / CC-BY-SA)



The individuals quoted above are unusual in that they remember so vividly the Prague Spring and its brutal demise. What took place in Czechoslovakia has, for most people, been largely forgotten in the wake of other more recent or more immediately violent world events. But it remains important to commemorate the happenings of 1968. With the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, socialism, as a system rather than as an abstract ideology, had suddenly lost all credibility. The unleashing of the tanks was an uncompromising and brutal example of socialism at work where the iron fist of Soviet power was crudely revealed.

Alexander Dubcek had never wanted to destroy communism but he had wanted to give party members the right to challenge party policy “according to their conscience”. In that he was no different from many of the early Bolsheviks. What the Soviets achieved by their invasion did more to damage the communist ideal than Dubcek’s reforms had ever done. The roots causes to the eventual demise of the USSR and the entire communist structure can be traced back to the invasion of 1968.

* <https://news.bbc.co.uk/omthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/21/news>

* Miroslav Holub, *Before and After: Collected English Translations*, 2008.

9. THE MOSCOW DIKTAT

Alexander Dubcek was brought to the Kremlin on Friday, 23 August. There were no formal greetings or handshakes, no photographs or presentations. Dubcek was given no time to wash and relax but ushered straight into a meeting with the top Soviet brass—Brezhnev, Kosygin, Podgorny and Voronov. It was a deliberate ploy, designed to make him feel humiliated and “second class”.

What Dubcek did not know was that President Svoboda and the other members of the Czechoslovak Presidium who had also been brought to Moscow had already been interviewed in the same fashion. To begin with the Soviets had wanted to gain Svoboda’s blessing for the establishment of a “quisling regime” under Alois Indra and Vasil Bilak. That would have been a painless and relatively simple process to implement.

It quickly became apparent, however, that no such gift would be forthcoming from the aged president. That was not all: the mood and attitude of the Czech people made it clear that Soviet-backed Indra was neither the man nor the leader they wanted: “It was the shared sense of purpose between the population and Dubcek’s Communist Party that prevented the Soviets from immediately installing a puppet government loyal to Moscow.”*

Dubcek’s interrogation by Brezhnev and the others was not easy, with the Soviets alternating between threats and undue praise: the stick and the carrot. Kosygin was easily the most aggressive of the four with Brezhnev attempting to run a middle course. The others, Dubcek later felt, were there simply as “make weight”.

The standard Soviet line was that failure to carry out previously agreed obligations had forced the Soviet Union and its satellites to “assist” the party in Czechoslovakia—they had not invaded. Right wingers in the Czech government, Brezhnev declared, were preparing to change Czechoslovakia from a socialist to a bourgeois republic—behind the backs of the unsuspecting Dubcek and President Svoboda.†

The meeting lasted for several hours, Prime Minister Cernik eventually joining the hard-pressed Dubcek. Despite the obvious lie of Brezhnev’s statement that the Soviet Union had not invaded and had no intention of keeping Czechoslovakia under occupation,

Dubcek still had the sense to separate truth from fiction. And there were several moments when he was presented with the opportunity to hit back at his interrogators.

After declaring his loyalty to the party and repeating the oft-quoted line that the invasion would lead only to the bitterest of consequences, he shook Brezhnev to the core with his next statement: “Let whatever is going to happen to me happen. I’m expecting the worst for myself and I’m resigned to it.”*



Vasil Bilak (left), the treacherous quisling, seen here with Romanian premier Nicolae Ceausescu, nine years after the Soviet invasion. (<http://fototeca.iiccr.ro>)

Leonid Brezhnev could only gulp and ask, “Why talk that way?” It became clear that he wanted and needed Dubcek on his side, at least for the moment.

One further piece of news that Dubcek managed to elicit was that the Fourteenth Congress had met, secretly, in Prague and that, with the president, prime minister and first secretary under arrest in Moscow, a new leadership had been elected. There was no room in the new assembly for traitors like Indra and his Slovakian comrade, Vasil Bilak. The Soviet plan to slip in a new government had clearly failed and they were now desperately searching for a fresh solution.

When the meeting finally ended, with no agreement and no officially signed declaration of intent, Dubcek was led away, leaving the four Soviet officials to fume. He was ushered into an elegant antechamber where Svoboda and the others were assembled. It was not exactly a happy reunion but Dubcek was relieved that he was no longer alone.

Dubcek’s refusal to sign any type of agreement with the Soviets was both courageous and exhausting. He needed to relax but was bluntly told that the Kremlin was not a hotel. Instead he was taken to a guest house where he and the other Czechs—men he referred to as Soviet “kidnap victims”—could rest.

Discussions went on, day and night, over the long weekend. The physical and emotional strain was enormous, particularly for the Czech delegation who really did feel as if they were staring into the abyss. To begin with there was a very real possibility that the Czech leaders could be put on trial for treason. If found guilty, as would inevitably be the case, they would be executed.

Back in Prague rumours were already circulating that Dubcek had been taken from the Kremlin and shot. Kosygin took great pleasure in telling him that one of the illegal radio stations in Prague had announced his execution, not as a rumour but as an actual fact, while Podgorny promised to bring a report from an American news agency making the same claim.

It was all part of the pressure but as the hours went by it became increasingly clear that the Soviets were desperate to reach an agreement. It was the only thing that would give their invasion any degree of credibility or legitimacy in the eyes of the West. The statement that their troops had been invited into Czechoslovakia could not possibly hold water if there was no formal acknowledgement and agreement from the Czech government of the time.

Discussion ranged widely but eventually came down to Soviet disapproval of the reforms of the Prague Spring and their embodiment in the action programme. Dubcek

could see that any indication of independent thought or action was anathema to Brezhnev and, from the outset, understood that this was going to be a difficult time that would likely have only one outcome. Even so, he and the other Czechs would try their best to come up with a solution that was acceptable to all.

Proposal from one side was followed by counter-proposal from the other, Soviet bribery was superseded by explicit threat. Slowly cracks began to appear in what had initially been a united Czech front. In particular, Slovakian delegate Gustav Husak began to move closer to the Soviet side, covering his tracks by declaring that there was not enough Slovak representation in the talks.

It took time but at last an agreement was hammered out. It was not before a dramatic temper tantrum and walkout by Brezhnev and his Politburo accomplices brought everyone to their feet in alarm. This piece of theatre was followed by a declaration from Dubcek that he would not sign anything that had been discussed or agreed over the weekend. In the end he was persuaded by Svoboda and Cernik to change his mind and sign the declaration. The two men drew a parallel to President Benes's agreement with Hitler in 1939, something that had been condemned by many but ultimately saved a huge number of Czech lives. Dubcek, with his innate sense of history, saw the significance of the point.

The talks eventually finished late on Sunday, 25 August, with a document that was signed by all participants apart from Frantisek Kriegel. Presidium member and chairman of the Communist/Non-Communist National Front, Kriegel refused to append his name to what he regarded as a sellout. Dubcek agreed with his point of view but was sufficiently removed to see the wider picture.

The term 'sellout' might be a little strong but there was no doubt that the document was primarily a Soviet diktat. It was hardly surprising. The Czechs held a very poor hand and everyone knew that, if there was no alternative, the Soviets would take drastic steps. Of course they would prefer an agreement but if that was not forthcoming the Soviet Union under Leonid Brezhnev was ruthless enough to dispose of any pretence of legitimacy and establish a dictatorial occupation and rule.

Brezhnev had assured everyone that the Soviet presence in Czechoslovakia would last only a few weeks. In fact it was more than twenty years before they finally pulled out, but in August 1968, Dubcek and the others were negotiating with powder that was more than a little damp and were hardly able to see what lay ahead.

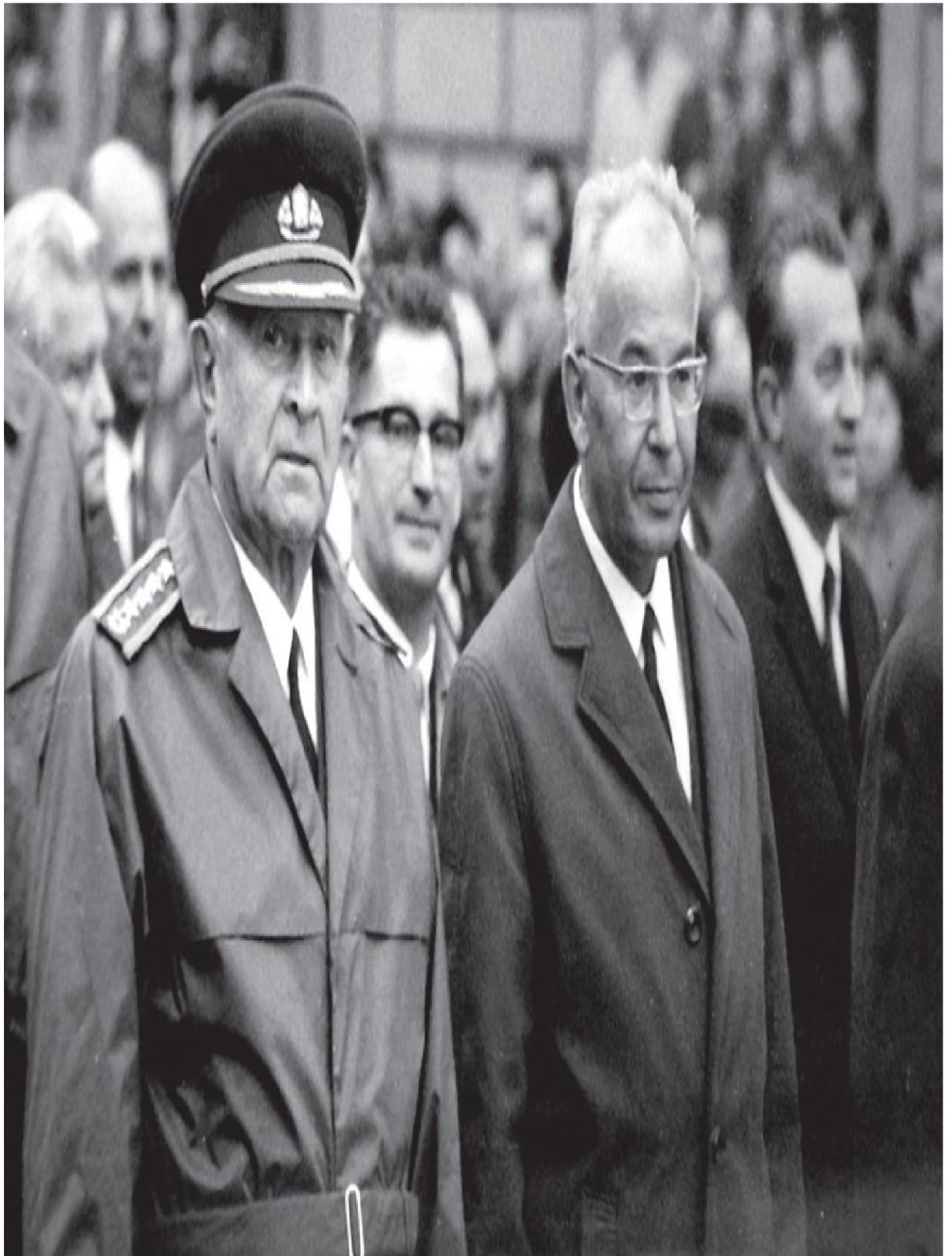
As the discussions came to a conclusion, Dubcek himself seemed to be sinking into a deep depression, his body shaking with fatigue and emotion. He had been unwell ever since the first moments of the Soviet occupation but now there were serious concerns about his health.

Throughout the weekend he had to be repeatedly given “shots”, supposedly to keep him going although whether this medication was a sedative to make him groggy or a stimulant to help him remain conscious remains unclear. At one stage he refused to take the injection so perhaps there is mileage in the idea that the Soviets were trying to keep him subdued with his influence limited to a minimum.

One thing was sure: Dubcek’s signature on the agreement document was essential. He had been absent from much of the discussion, relegating himself to the role of an adviser rather than a participant. Even so he was clearly aware of the significance of his name and personality: “For many people at home—and abroad—my name had become the embodiment of the Prague Spring and of our struggle to defend it against Soviet pressure. Hence I had a clear and undeniable personal responsibility for the lives of thousands of people at home.”*

Dubcek knew that the best he and the others could do was to limit the damage and still preserve enough room to carry out actions that would be independent of the Soviets at some stage in the future. He took some consolation from the fact that the final draft of what became known as the Moscow Diktat did not admit the existence of counter-revolution in Czechoslovakia. Neither—at least at this stage—did it attempt to identify and destroy the reforms of the Prague Spring. That would come later.

In truth, however, the document offered nothing to the Czechs. The troops remained in situ; they were to be withdrawn on a schedule that was yet to be determined and drawn up. That schedule depended on how quickly and how effectively ‘normalization’ was achieved. Normalization, a new word to the Czechs, was nothing more than a euphemism for a return to the Communist dictatorship of pre-Dubcek days. The threats had not gone away.



General Ludvik Svoboda and the Slovakian Gustav Husak, a year after the invasion. Husak had succumbed to Soviet pressure following the invasion. (Peter Zeliznak)

When the diktat was shared with the people Soviet overlordship was apparent for all to see. There were fifteen points in the document but in the main they consisted of flowery language that said very little apart from the statement that the Soviet Union agreed to provide understanding and support to the Czech Communist Party. The important thing was the signatures at the bottom of the document that showed there had been discussion and cooperation.*

Anything particularly significant, such as Soviet approval of Czech government acts and edicts, the reining-in of what had become a free press and the removal of unrestricted travel to the West, had already been discussed and imposed at the weekend discussion. It was the sign of a complete and total Soviet victory.

The Czech delegation returned to Prague on the morning of Tuesday 27 August. As they stepped off the plane at Ruzyne Airport, it was clear to everyone that these were broken men, not even trying to put a brave face on what had been a humiliating, devastating defeat.

They had returned with a stringent schedule, imposed by the Soviet Politburo. President Svoboda was to make an initial, short address to the people over the radio; Josef Smrkovsky would talk to the National Assembly and Cernik the government, telling them the contents of the Moscow Diktat. Dubcek would give a fuller address to the nation that same day.

When, at 5.30 that evening, Dubcek addressed his people on television and radio he was unsteady on his feet and could barely utter a sentence without pausing or stuttering for breath. On several occasions he nearly broke down in tears. Nevertheless he managed to appeal to the public, assuring them that they were all suffering under “temporary measures” and that he would continue trying to find opportunities for further reform. Knowing that the whole nation was either listening or watching, Dubcek was determined not to create mistaken illusions in the people. He thanked them for their support and made it clear that he and the rest of the government had lost the power to act independently of the Soviet Bloc. He also stated that the negotiated withdrawal of foreign troops from Czech soil was the most important task he and the others had in front of them.

Ill or under pressure, Dubcek was back—and more important than that, he was back with power still in his grasp. It may have been power at the pleasure of the Soviets but it was at least power of a sort. And to begin with the government did try to maintain its independent course. The National Assembly, under pressure or persuasion from

Smrkovsky, even passed a resolution stating that the Soviet occupation of their country was illegal.

As far as the Czechs were concerned the Soviet occupation continued to be the most significant issue in the crisis. Dubcek had been told by Brezhnev that he must get the United Nations to withdraw the issue of the Soviet occupation from their agenda, otherwise Moscow would not even begin to countenance the withdrawal of the troops. It was the same with the freedom of the press: control the media, said the Soviets, or nothing will be done.

RUS GO HOME!

SMRT AKUPA

These were major issues to which there was no easy answer. Dubcek had no control over the UN and how, without the imposition of rigid censorship, he was expected to roll back the freedoms so recently granted to the media remained an imponderable matter. For the rest of his period in power they were matters with which Dubcek would constantly wrestle.

Within a few days of his return, Dubcek, still unsteady on his feet, met with the members of Central Committee. Elected by the clandestine Fourteenth Congress, the members had been meeting in a factory building in Vysocany where they were protected by units of the Workers' Militia. They agreed to dissolve the congress and pledged their support, agreeing that Dubcek should remain at the head of the nation as First Secretary. It was an important moment.

Throughout September and October the Soviets continued to impose their policy of normalization, using Dubcek and his government to implement it. In particular they were intent on clamping down on freedom of speech and the openness of the press. At Soviet discretion and pleasure Radio Prague returned to the air waves early in September. Programmes were carefully monitored although most announcers invariably prefixed their broadcasts with the comment that this was Radio Prague coming from "occupied Czechoslovakia". Surprisingly, the Soviets turned a deaf ear to the appellation, obviously preferring a more tangible target for intervention.

Foreign correspondents were also now operating again and in radio broadcasts tried to present an impression of what life was like in Czechoslovakia—without annoying the Soviets too much but still painting a pertinent picture: "The Dubcek regime is still in charge and the tanks have disappeared from the centre of Prague. They are now half an hour away and only bullet scars on the museum and damaged street signs tell the story of what happened. Everything is calm but it is deceptive. The freedoms granted not so long ago are being slowly taken back and more than a casual glance is needed to see where the censor bites."* The broadcaster moved slowly from basic facts to take an almost poetical tone for his final few minutes on air: "The one positive element is that up till now the Russians are hesitating to finish the job they began so efficiently on 20 August. Yet if you want to meet an old friend it has to be in some quiet street or some obscure café with a good view of the door. There is a distinct air of unreality to Czechoslovakia."†

Alexander Dubcek did his best to steer a middle course, knowing that the possibility of bloodshed remained close. His position was increasingly difficult, untenable even, and his personality was such that he felt and took every blow that was delivered to the

Czech people as a personal attack. He was, as *The Times* presented him to its readers, “a gentle, decent man, as devoted to his countrymen as they so manifestly were to him”.^{*}

Dubcek had an abhorrence of violence, refusing to resort to the club or rifle even when the Soviet forces had invaded and his own safety was in question. He was not going to change now. His was a humanitarian policy, one that was undoubtedly morally correct, but it resulted in a strange, almost schizophrenic period of government with Dubcek submitting to or placating the Soviets one moment and remaining close to his ideals and principles the next.[†]

Many in Czechoslovakia looked at what was happening and shook their heads—this was not what the reforms of the Prague Spring had promised. Dubcek, as First Secretary and front man for the government, inevitably came in for criticism, often from those who had previously been his most fervent supporters. It was relatively easy for those who were not in government or without some degree of political control to criticize. Dubcek, with limited power and ability to enforce anything other than Soviet-generated ideas, had to take a pragmatic approach. Inevitably, it infuriated some, placated others and really pleased no one.

Within Czechoslovakia as a whole there was increased hostility toward the Soviets that autumn that sometimes resulted in violence, with Molotov cocktails and gunshots peppering the streets of Prague and Bratislava. Sometimes the Soviets were able to take a hidden hand to keep the peace. Prague students planned a large protest march that November. Knowing what it could lead to, Soviet authorities bluntly informed the Czech police that if they did not prevent the march then the occupying troops would do it for them. The march did not take place.

When violence did erupt it was usually short-lived but bloody. By the end of the year 137 Czech citizens had been killed, and at least 500 seriously injured in the disturbances. Both figures would rise in the months ahead. Of the invading soldiers and airmen approximately ninety-five died, often as a result of accidental shootings. Several were run over, crushed by their own tanks, while many more died in aircraft crashes. As might be expected there was not a great deal of sympathy among the Czechs.

As an indication of the hostility toward the Soviet occupation young people were now joining the Czechoslovak Communist Party in their droves. Joining the representative party of the very country that was oppressing them was an unusual way of expressing dissatisfaction with the communist regime in Moscow—and in Prague as well, come to that—but, if nothing else, the events of the Prague Spring had given the Czech people a degree of political awareness they had not previously dreamed about, let alone owned. It was clear that the intention of the young, idealistic new members was to take control of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, if not now then at some stage in the

not too distant future. Even marginalized members of society, recidivists and hardened criminals, renounced their ‘professions’—in the short term at least—for the sake of political unity. Many had become dissatisfied at the way events had turned out, feeling that Dubcek and the party had let them down. They were determined not to allow such a thing to happen again. Change, as Dubcek had known for years, could only come from the inside and the youth of the country were beginning to realize it. Anything else was imposition by foreign, stronger powers.



An anti-Soviet demonstration in Bergen, Norway. (Eirik Sundvor / Municipal Archives of Trondheim)

Rejection of Dubcek was not a universal sentiment. There were others, young and old, who retained their respect and admiration for the man and all he had managed to achieve. Many of the younger Czechs were even forming Dubcek clubs where people could gather and discuss the reforms, along with studying Dubcek's speeches. It was bizarre, surreal, but it was typical of the times and of the situation.



For a while at least the borders remained open and while Dubcek and his supporters did not urge people to flee the country, it was not long before over 150,000 Czechs had left their homeland to live in exile in the West. Many more were left stranded when the Soviets finally sealed the borders at the end of the year. They had been taking what was probably their first ever foreign holiday but now found that there was no way back into the country.

There may have been a degree of support for Dubcek but hatred—and that is not too strong a word to use—of the Soviet Union and of its continued presence in Czechoslovakia continued to mount. It was not something that was motivated by government but a general public sentiment that caught and held the mood of the Czech people.

It was a taut, traumatic period, a time when Czech resistance manifested itself in workers' strikes and the temporary withdrawal of labour. The student or youth support for such strikes was vast, young and old coming together in a solidarity that had been previously unknown. It was protest, it was resistance but, inevitably, in the long term it was doomed to fail as slowly but surely the reforms of the Prague Spring continued to be undone. It seemed as if the Czech government, and the Czech people, intellectuals and workers alike, were powerless to prevent the clock from being turned back. Normalization would have its day.



Travel restrictions were reintroduced that December. The ability or right to travel abroad was the last of Dubcek's many reforms to be destroyed and removing it once more sealed Czechoslovakia off from the West. Any cultural or political connections would, from now on, have to be of the underground variety.

Dubcek might still have believed that reforms were needed. However, in truth, by the end of 1968 he was powerless to do anything but talk about them. With a heavy foreign military presence in his country, one showing no inclination to withdraw, and with most of his government edicts having to be approved by Moscow before they could be made public, he was a puppet leader whose time was limited. And both he and the Soviets knew it.

* Sylvia Poggioli, 'The Prague Spring: An Exercise in Democracy', National Public Radio (US).

† Soviet stereographic record of meeting, 23 August 1968.

* Ibid.

* Dubcek, p. 209.

* Quoted in Kurlansky, p. 304.

* BBC Radio Archives, 1968.

† Ibid., 1968.

* Kurlansky, p. 204.

† Mary Heinemann, 'The Scheming Apparatchik of the Prague Spring' in *Europe-Asia Studies*, December 2008.

10. JAN PALACH, THE ULTIMATE PROTEST

The final few months of 1968 were a difficult time for Alexander Dubcek. He was under constant pressure from the youthful reformers who had tasted freedom and democracy and could not understand why their revered leader could not continue to deliver more. Many were now openly calling him a traitor, someone who had let his people and his country down.

But that was not the full extent of his problems. Like the proverbial walnut Dubcek was also being crushed by the other arm of the nutcracker. The Soviets were now demanding purges at the regional level of the Czech Communist Party. For a while he seriously considered resigning, knowing that purges at local level would just be the start. They would inevitably spread upward.

He was dissuaded from resigning by Svoboda and Smrkovsky who were realistic enough to see that purges were bound to come. It was, literally, just a matter of time. However, the longer Dubcek held back and continued in office the better prepared the potential victims would be. And so, despite his reservations, the First Secretary continued to plough on.

As far as Dubcek was concerned, this was a period of moderate success followed by abject failure. The successes were what kept him going. It was not a withdrawal but in September Soviet troops were removed from the streets of Prague. Now billeted just a few miles outside the city, they were available to return—as they often did—whenever trouble was brewing or whenever the Soviet military command decided that they needed to “show the flag”. It was a small victory but the removal of the tanks and armoured cars from immediate view made the Czech people feel considerably less threatened.

Other successes were more substantial. As outlined in the original action programme, important steps to achieve a federalized structure were now made. A delegation from the Czech National Council was sent to Bratislava and a draft constitutional document was drawn up, legalizing Slovakia as a country in its own right. On 27 October the Czech parliament approved the law and three days later President Svoboda signed the document in a formal ceremony at Bratislava Castle.

It was a significant achievement, acknowledging the history and the aspirations of the Slovak people. It also helped keep the action programme alive and in the minds of Czechs. The Soviets grumbled but did not interfere. They had other things in mind, still obsessed by the way their actions would be interpreted in the West. Various schemes were coming to fruition, schemes that would deal with that particular problem. The enforcement of a Soviet-instigated treaty that legally allowed Soviet troops to remain in Czechoslovakia was one of them. It had long been a bone of contention but no conclusion had ever been reached. Until now that is. The treaty was reluctantly signed by Czech leaders at the end of October. Earlier in the month Alexei Kosygin, accompanied by Marshal Andrei Grechko, the Soviet defence minister, had flown to Prague in order to pressurize the Czech government into ratifying the treaty. The alternative, Grechko informed President Svoboda, was a reoccupation of Prague and other major cities by Soviet troops. Svoboda did not resist; he knew there was no alternative.

The Czech National Assembly approved the treaty with only four votes against, Dubcek voting yes. He knew that his position, for whatever tactical reasons he might entertain, would be seen as a betrayal by many Czechs unable to understand his motives. The need for more than a little pragmatism—prompted by brutal Soviet blackmail that lay behind the approval—was beyond the realm of most ordinary Czechs. That autumn Dubcek was out and about, visiting factories, farms and workplaces. He was concerned to see that while so many still supported him and the government, they were unable to understand what he later called “the complexity of the situation”. While they clearly hated making any concessions to the Soviets, the workers simply could not understand that the Czech government was no longer able to do exactly what it wanted.*

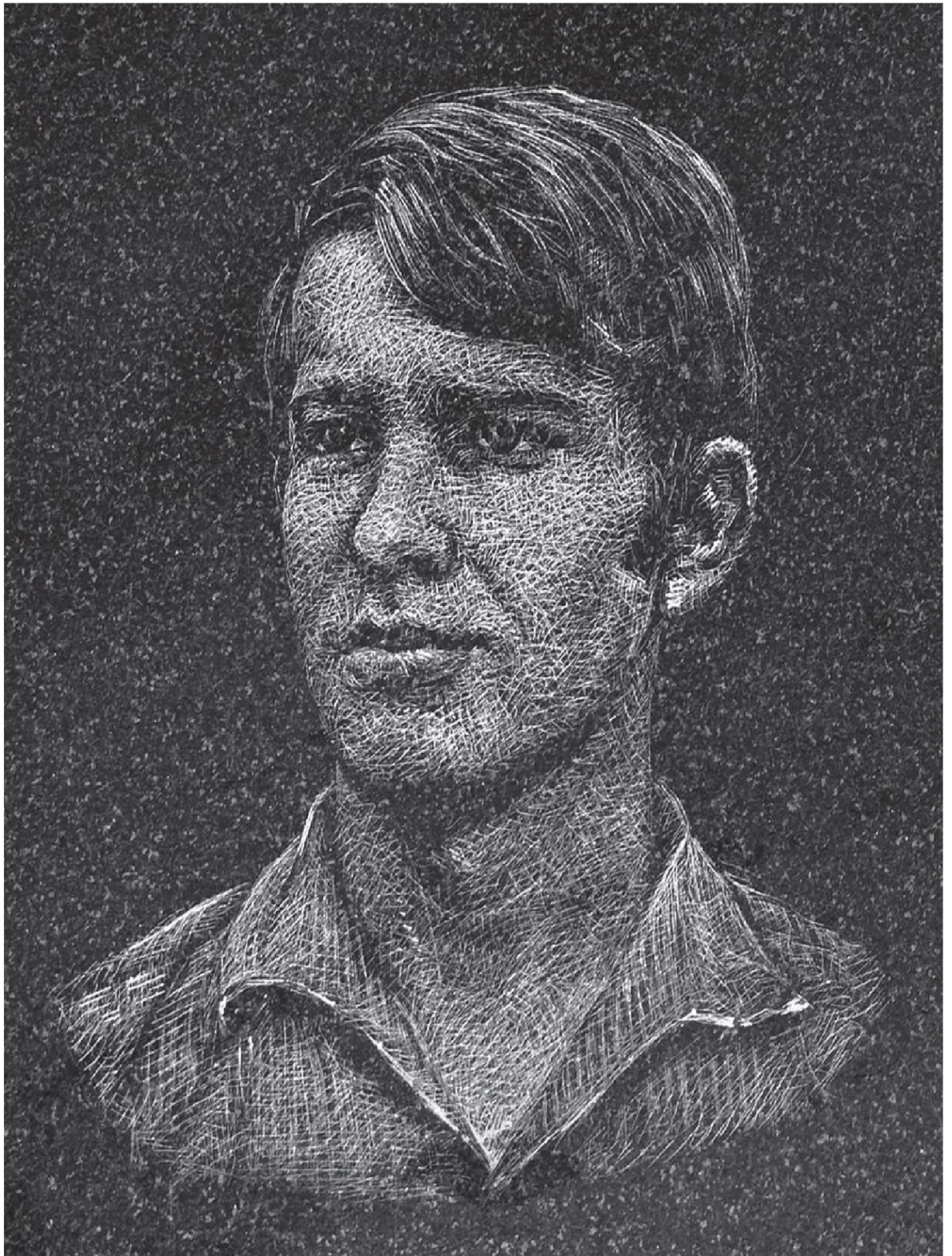


With federation firmly in place, the previously supportive Slovak politician Gustav Husak had become something of a Soviet mouthpiece. He now demanded that the four top positions in the country should be allocated equally among Czechs and Slovaks. He had a point. Cernik, Svoboda and Smrkovsky, respectively holders of the posts of prime minister, president and chair of the Federal Assembly, were all Czech. The only Slovak in the top four was First Secretary Alexander Dubcek. As far as Husak was concerned, one of them had to go. Cernik and Svoboda were beyond his reach; his target was Dubcek's chief ally, Josef Smrkovsky. Hugely popular in Czechoslovakia, Smrkovsky was disliked and feared in the Soviet Union and to remove him from Dubcek's side would be a powerful political coup.

Dubcek was keen to fight his friend's corner but Smrkovsky, rather than cause undue problems for his comrade, saw that there was little alternative other than to 'fall on his sword'. He duly resigned from the Federal Assembly and relinquished his seat in the Party Presidium. His going was met with uproar, many of the previous supporters of the Prague Spring voicing their anger, feeling betrayed and humiliated by what appeared to be yet another Soviet-induced low against their democratic rights.

Despite Smrkovsky's appearance on television where he made an emotional appeal for calm, there were immediate protests and demonstrations. Across the country tension increased once more. Into this bitter environment stepped a young man by the name of Jan Palach.

Jan Palach was a student of history and political economy in the Department of Philosophy at Charles University in Prague. He was born in the central Bohemian town of Vsetaty where his parents ran a confectionary business until it was closed down by the Communists in 1951. A bright but introverted young man, Palach had few friends at university but those that he did have later testified that he was determined and dedicated, intrigued as he was by Czech history and politics.



At 4 p.m. on 19 January 1969 Jan Palach set fire to himself on the ramp at the front of the National Museum in upper Wenceslas Square. Palach then somehow managed to run across the road toward a nearby grocery store—whether in agony that demanded movement or in an attempt to extinguish the fire now consuming his body will never be known. Whatever he intended, Palach collapsed onto the pavement as the flames took greater hold. He was rushed to the Charles University Hospital where he died in considerable pain three days later.

Jaroslava Moserova, a burns specialist who treated Palach in hospital and who talked to the young man as he slipped into and out of consciousness, was sure that protesting against Soviet occupation was far from his main purpose of self-immolation. His primary aim had been to bring to a halt the sense of demoralization that he saw in the Czech people: “He wanted to stop that demoralization ... the multitudes of people in the street, silent with sad eyes, serious faces, which when you looked at them you understood ... that all decent people were on the verge of making a compromise.”*

Whatever his intention Jan Palach suffered 85-percent third-degree burns that caused irreparable damage to his lungs. As he lay, heavily sedated, Palach knew that he was going to die but was still able to receive visitors to whom he spoke and listened. It was reported that he asked other protestors not to follow his example, to find other ways to protest, but like his claims that he was just one of several other “torches”, the validity of the statement remains in doubt.

Prior to his self-immolation Palach had sent out a number of letters, claiming to be a member of a large, clandestine resistance movement, many members of which were ready and willing to burn themselves to death. In fact, Palach was a solitary activist with no followers or similarly minded colleagues—at least not to begin with.

Whatever he imagined he was going to achieve, Palach’s suicide immediately caught the nation’s attention. Within days there were hunger strikers on Wenceslas Square and mass demonstrations by students and activists. When he came to be buried a few days later there was no government representative at the funeral ceremony, none wanting to provoke the Kremlin’s ire. But his funeral sparked off a major demonstration, with thousands of people—mostly young—converging on Olsany Cemetery where his body was laid to rest.

The grave soon became something of a national shrine and in October 1973, in an attempt to obliterate Palach’s memory, Czech secret police exhumed the body. His remains were then cremated, the ashes sent to his mother. The body of an old woman from a nearby rest home was laid in the grave in his place.

It was perhaps inevitable that others would follow Palach's example, even though none of them knew or had met the young student. Just a month after Palach's self-immolation the student Jan Zajic also burned himself to death in almost the same spot on Wenceslas Square. Burnings also took place in several other parts of Czechoslovakia. Zajic was followed by the brewery worker Josef Hlavaty, a construction worker by the name of Miroslav Malinka and a toolmaker, Evzan Plocek—clearly political intensity did not begin and end with students.



Jan Palach was not the first protestor to die by means of self-immolation. A Polish man by the name of Ryszard Siwiec had burned himself to death some months before in protest against the Soviet invasion. It is unlikely that Palach knew of his sacrifice as the Polish and Soviet governments quickly hushed up the affair.

Leonid Brezhnev, naturally, attempted to put a negative spin on the suicide. Palach, he said, had been exploited by those who wanted to perpetuate the chaos of the Prague Spring. He had not really wanted to burn himself to death, his self-immolation being intended merely as a gesture. Unfortunately, whether by design or accident, someone had switched the contents of the fuel container and as a result Palach had died accidentally.

Whatever Brezhnev said, in death Jan Palach became a martyr whose courage and strength would grow to legendary status. He became, in fact, “the conscience of the nation”, an example of self-sacrifice and determination that was held up for all to see. Brezhnev might disparage the suicide but to the Czechs Jan Palach’s action was regarded as the ultimate sacrifice.*

Since his death, Palach has been commemorated in song, poetry, film and many other art forms. The Zippo Band famously recorded ‘The Funeral of Jan Palach’ and Kasabian dedicated ‘Club Foot’ to his memory. Slovakian poet Edvard Kocbek wrote and published the poem *Rocket* which juxtaposed two seminal events from 1969, the *Apollo 11* moon landing—“technological nihilism” as he called it—and “a rocket named Palach”.

Polish artist Wiktor Szostalo who was to flee and seek political asylum in the US captured the essence of Palach’s sacrifice with his words in *Performance for Freedom*: “I am Jan Palach, I’m a Czech, I’m a Pole, a Lithuanian, a Vietnamese, an Afghani, a betrayed You. After I’ve burnt myself a thousand times perhaps we’ll win.” The recently dead Jan Palach would probably have agreed with the sentiment.†

Palach’s death affected Dubcek more deeply than he had ever imagined possible. It was an emotional end to a very difficult period and when, on 19 January 1969, he went home to Bratislava he was struck down with a severe case of flu with a raging fever. He was so ill that he had to be admitted to hospital. He was still there when Palach was buried. It was the beginning of February before Dubcek was able to return to his duties.

The rumour machine was soon at work once again and the word on the Prague streets was that Dubcek had been poisoned. It was, people whispered, radiation sickness, the deadly radiation having been dropped into his soup during a recent visit to Moscow. It was too ridiculous to remain in the public domain for long and Dubcek’s recovery put an

end to the story but it showed the fragile nature of Czech society at the time and, in particular, the fear that was rampant in the country.

The 1969 World Ice Hockey Championships were held that year in Stockholm and on 21 March the Russian and Czech teams came face to face in a pool match. To the joy of the whole Czech nation the Soviets were beaten 2-0. Thousands took to the streets to celebrate what was more than just a sporting victory: it was revenge for the humiliation of the past few months. When the two nations met again a few weeks later in the final, it resulted in yet another Czech victory, this time by a score of 4-3. Czechoslovakia had replaced Russia as world champions. In Prague there was unrestrained joy as nearly 15,000 people gathered on Wenceslas Square to celebrate the triumph.

There was much singing and chanting and dancing. And then things turned ugly. Paving stones were thrown against the Aeroflot office windows—possibly by Soviet agitators among the crowd—and the glass shattered. For a moment it looked as if the demonstration would develop into something rather more ominous. Soviet leaders would hardly have been worried about losing a hockey game but the sheer power of Czech emotion caught them by surprise, their believing that demonstrations like this, clear manifestations of Czech national pride, were things of the past. It was not long before the Kremlin was on the telephone, urging the Czech army to intervene.



Jaroslava Moseroová

lékařka
překladatelka
autorka
ilustrátorka
politická

Memorial plaque to Jaroslava Moserova, the burns specialist who treated Palach in hospital. (Michal Manas)

Dubcek immediately stepped in. As long as he remained in office, he told General Dzur, the defence minister, he would never agree to the use of armed force against his own people. In the end it was not needed: Czech police handled the situation relatively easily.



If Dubcek and the government thought they had avoided a bombshell they were very much mistaken. Recent events had shown that the Czechs might be down but they were not out. As far as Brezhnev was concerned, it was time to act. The Politburo seized on the ice hockey ‘riots’—along with Jan Palach’s self-immolation—to ratchet up the pressure on the Czech government. Within days Marshal Grechko, accompanied by V. S. Semyonov, the deputy Soviet foreign minister flew to Prague and appeared before the Military Council, not to negotiate but to make specific demands that were wholly unpalatable to Dubcek, but there seemed no way of avoiding them. Censorship was to be immediately reinstated and troops were to be used to suppress further outbreaks of what Grechko termed “counter-revolution”. If there were any more demonstrations like the ones following the Czech hockey victories then Soviet troops would be authorized to shoot at any “enemy forces” approaching the perimeter of their bases, wherever they might be.

Dubcek understood at once that the Soviets had reached the point of no return. When Semyonov informed him that “the Counter-revolution must be beheaded” he knew exactly what he meant. The reformers, and him in particular, had become the principal targets for Soviet aggression.

* Dubcek, p. 229.

* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Palach

* www.radio.cz/en/section/czech-history.

† Ibid.

11. A PRAGUE WINTER

Alexander Dubcek now found himself more and more isolated as his supporters, the ‘pro-reform group’ in the Presidium, grew increasingly disjointed and unclear in both their actions and their thoughts. Dubcek’s three main backers had become almost alien to him. It was what he had feared but that did not make things any easier.

President Svoboda had become subdued and depressed. Smrkovsky was preparing to quit his position in government and had lost any real interest in affairs of state. Prime Minister Cernik, perhaps the unhappiest of them all, seemed to have simply thrown up his hands in despair, accepting that what would happen would happen. That left Dubcek, alone, far from well and without any hope of curbing Soviet demands.

He discussed the situation with his family and his long-serving secretaries. All agreed that pressure from the Soviet Union would only be stepped up in the months ahead. That would be disagreeable to him but, more importantly, would be likely to lead to opposition out in the streets. With thoughts of resignation tumbling about in his mind, Dubcek also had to cope with fresh Soviet demands. One of them was the insistence that the government punish the writer Josef Macek who had published a collection of documents on the Soviet invasion. *The Black Book* was a virulent condemnation of Soviet policy and for over twenty years was one of the last examples of literary work produced in Czechoslovakia under the auspices of a free press.

Eventually Dubcek came to the decision that he would have to go, and go voluntarily before he was pushed. The alternative was further Soviet provocation with the prospect of violence always hovering on the horizon. When he shared his decision with his three colleagues they all agreed that there really was no alternative. Each displayed a variety of emotions: Cernik seemed genuinely pleased to see him go, Svoboda reluctantly agreed that there was no other way and Smrkovsky felt that Dubcek and he had kept fighting long enough. Even so, Smrkovsky said, they would continue to fight after his resignation—wouldn’t they?

On 12 April 1969 Alexander Dubcek informed the Presidium that he had decided to step down as First Secretary. With the Presidium now comprised of a great many anti-Dubcek figures, the news was accepted reasonably enough, without too much objection. Discussion then turned to the appointment of a successor. It was a lame ending to what

had been a vibrant and compelling period in Czech history but it was now over. A new era was beginning.

The front runner to succeed Alexander Dubcek was Gustav Husak who certainly had Soviet backing. Dubcek was bitterly opposed to the appointment of such a man and, disappointed as he was with the position adopted by his former friend and colleague, proposed Cernik to succeed him. Cernik declined the nomination, which left only Husak for the position he clearly coveted. It elicited a highly critical response from Dubcek who was clear that Husak was not the man to take Czechoslovakia forward: "I decided to state openly, in Husak's presence, why I was opposed to his succession. Longer than most, I said, I had perceived his serious character flaws and unscrupulous ways ... I was afraid that he would lightly abandon everything we had managed to defend in Moscow in August, and even the limited reforms we were still defending."*







In 1969, protests erupted in Prague on the first anniversary of the Soviet invasion. (Marie Ccheidzeova)

It was a true enough statement but it was hardly designed to gain him many friends among Husak's supporters, or endear him to the man himself. By that stage Dubcek really did not mind. He was tired of it all and even the responses of his three closest comrades had made him doubt the integrity of the men he had trusted for so long. He had already been to see President Svoboda and expressed his doubts about Husak. Svoboda seemed almost disinterested but eventually managed to stutter out the news that that he had already told Grechko that Dubcek would soon resign. Dubcek was not angry: he just felt sorry for the old man who was now clearly out of his depth.

Despite the misgivings of Dubcek and several members of the Presidium, at the next meeting on 17 April, Gustav Husak was appointed as First Secretary. In due course he also became president, rolling back the legislation of 1968 that had begun the Prague Spring and removed Novotny from the position.

Dubcek remained a member of the Presidium and even took up an appointment as chair of the Federal Assembly, as the parliament was now known. His motives were simple enough: he hoped to be able to restrain or hinder whatever plans and policies Husak intended to implement. It was a forlorn hope.

Husak almost immediately oversaw the closing down of several leading newspapers and magazines. Those that remained suddenly found themselves with new editors to toe the party line. Censorship was back and it was back with a vengeance. It was the same with regional party secretaries. Any officials who had supported the reforms of the Prague Spring were unceremoniously dumped out of office. Just as Dubcek had feared it

was the start of a series of purges that would eventually see almost half a million people displaced and thrown out of their jobs.

Husak was concerned about the approaching first anniversary of the Soviet invasion, expecting demonstrations and even riots. The last thing he needed was Dubcek as a focal point for potential disruption or disagreement. Consequently, at the end of July he ordered both Dubcek and Smrkovsky to leave Prague and stay out of the way until further notice. Dubcek went, almost happily, to his home in Bratislava. He had no commitments involving the Federal Assembly until September. There was nothing to keep him in the capital and he spent the summer months either at home, fishing and swimming at a nearby lake. His absence left Husak free to prepare for any troubles that might take place during the anniversary week.

At Husak's urging, special units, skilled in crowd control, were created out of the army and police force, while weapons such as teargas, riot shields and heavy truncheons were stockpiled, ready for use. Husak was taking no chances. To the casual observer it must have seemed as if he was preparing for war.

Despite the preparations, the anniversary was marked by huge public demonstrations in Prague, Bratislava and elsewhere. More than 30,000 troops and police went into action and half a dozen protesters, most of them under the age of 20, were killed. Husak began preparing a bill to declare martial law, the draft bill being presented to the Presidium of the Czech Communist Party by none other than Oldrich Cernik. It was a complete turnabout for Cernik who was now desperate to remain in government as prime minister, in Husak's favour. As it turned out, his change of sides did him little good and he was out of office within a few months.

As chair of the Federal Assembly, Dubcek's presence in Prague was suddenly demanded. He received the summons with a degree of trepidation but knew that he had a duty to fulfil and no fears or concerns about his personal safety were ever going to stop him. When he arrived he was immediately browbeaten and told that refusal to sign the bill or to hinder its progress in any way might well lead to further disturbances. If that were so he, Alexander Dubcek, would be responsible. It was a strange turnaround. Dubcek had not deliberately avoided the Presidium meeting; he was doing no more than he had been instructed to do: staying away from Prague.



It was all a matter of dubious politics. Dubcek's signature on the document was neither here nor there but the Husak regime—and, of course, the Soviets—felt that his agreement would give the bill the added degree of respectability that was needed. Unfortunately for Husak, Dubcek was no soft touch. He realized that the draft was hardly legal, that parliamentary procedure had been ignored, and he therefore fought against its acceptance. Husak should have expected it but ultimately the new First Secretary was only too well aware where Dubcek stood on the matter. No matter how desperately he argued, Dubcek was always fighting a losing battle. He was isolated, holding a lone view, one that seemed out of date and of little consequence any more. His previous allies all seemed to have deserted him and even those who remained—men like Smrkovsky—were as powerless as him. Above all he was appalled by the prospect of violence. He had always resisted the use of force, even after the Soviet invasion of August 1968, and knew that scattered student protests were no match for Husak's riot squads or, if things went badly wrong, renewed Soviet intervention. And so, he gave in. He presided over the bill's passage and its signing into law.

Regret immediately struck and remained with Dubcek for the rest of his life. But he was not alone in appending his name to what many came to see as a symbol of betrayal. The document was also signed by Prime Minister Cernik and President Svoboda: "The funeral announcement of Prague Spring was published with the signatures of the three people whose names were most closely associated with it. For millions of people it was distressing news and some even refused to believe it."*

Two weeks later Dubcek was unceremoniously removed from his position as chair of the Federal Assembly. It was done behind his back, when he was away from Prague, but it was a move that cannot have been unsuspected. His usefulness had expired and Husak no longer needed his name to lend credence to government decisions.

The Central Committee meeting of 25 September brought another surprise when Oldrich Cernik stood up and recanted his views on the reforms of the Prague Spring. Desperate to remain in power, it was a last throw of the dice for Cernik who had finally revealed himself as shallow and self-serving. But above all, for men like Alexander Dubcek it was sad to see a colleague he had respected and admired humiliating himself at the feet of Husak and his cronies.

At the same meeting Dubcek was asked to follow Cernik's example. He refused and instead defended his actions during his period as First Secretary. Having made his point he then walked calmly out of the meeting. Almost immediately he resigned his membership of the Czech and Slovak Central Committee.

In what was seen as the final act of the normalization process, Husak now declared that the Soviet intervention of August 1968 had been no more than assistance from a fellow-Communist state in order to curb a dangerous counter-revolution. Calling the Fourteenth Party Congress in the days after the Soviet invasion was said to have been an act of anti-Party vandalism. The Congress was declared illegal. As if to drive home the point a number of the Central Committee members, including Josef Smrkovsky and other significant pro-reform delegates, were immediately expelled.

The Prague Spring was condemned as “non-Marxist” and anyone who appeared to have opposed the Soviet invasion was regarded as traitorous. Alexander Dubcek was under no illusions about where he stood. And yet, for some reason he remained untouched. Husak clearly felt that the time was not yet right to rid himself of the main proponent of the Prague Spring. There was a little more mileage—and perhaps humiliation—to be gained by keeping him around.

* Dubcek, p. 240.

* Ibid, p. 246.

12. THOSE WERE THE DAYS

The autumn of 1969 found Alexander Dubcek at home in Bratislava, out of favour and out of a job. He was 49 years old and in his opinion there was still much that he could do to help his people and his country. As if to confirm this, in October Vasil Bilak, now secretary of the Central Committee in charge of foreign affairs, offered him the post of ambassador to Ghana. Knowing that the purpose of the regime's offer was to simply get him out of the way, Dubcek refused the position and went home to his wife and children.

Dubcek knew that would not be the end of the matter. Soon Husak was in touch, demanding to know if he was in agreement with the Party's political direction. It was clear that expulsion from the Party was not far off even though Husak was not yet confident enough to take that final step.

Anna, Dubcek's wife, had continued to have problems with her health. She was worn down and unhappy, wishing that her husband had accepted the proposal to work abroad. It would at least have meant some respite from the continual persecutions they had to face on an almost daily basis. She and Dubcek quarrelled and then came another offer, this time as ambassador to Turkey. Dubcek accepted, not for his own sake but for Anna's.

Dubcek was always convinced of two things: one, that their house was bugged and the government knew of his disagreement with Anna—more importantly, they knew exactly when to make an offer; and two, he was sure that Husak was hoping, was indeed convinced, he would defect from Turkey and seek asylum in the West. Defection would solve the problem of Alexander Dubcek once and for all.

On 16 January 1970 Dubcek and Anna flew to Ankara to begin their period of foreign service. He had never had much to do with foreign policy and had endured several weeks' 'preparation' at the ministry of foreign affairs before taking up his appointment. However, the traditional reception given for all new ambassadors by the First Secretary did not take place. Husak simply did not have it in him to be magnanimous and Dubcek did not care.

Much to the couple's surprise, and pleasure, they were welcomed at the airport by huge crowds and the Turkish police had to call in extra help to keep order. The reception was repeated wherever Dubcek went. He was also generously received by ambassadors

and officials of countries like the US and Britain where he was repeatedly offered diplomatic immunity. Dubcek always refused. His place was in Czechoslovakia with his people. It was new and it was different but it was strangely enjoyable. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to talk to the new ambassador, to express their sympathies for what had happened in Czechoslovakia. Dubcek's popularity had never been higher and he was gratified by the friendliness of the people, dignitaries and ordinary men and women alike.

When the time came for Dubcek to return to Czechoslovakia there were problems and it soon became clear that Husak was deliberately blocking his return. By keeping Dubcek out of the country, Husak thought he was preventing his enemy from becoming an even greater thorn in his side—perhaps he would grow tired of the game and finally seek asylum in the West. The tactics were simple but effective. There was no room on the aircraft, Dubcek was informed, even though the plane was actually half empty. He tried several times but always met with the same response and the same result. Eventually, he was forced to leave Anna behind, ease out of the house when he was not being observed and take a flight to Budapest. From there he could slip across the border. That, at least, was the theory, but at Budapest airport Dubcek was met by representatives of the Czech government and driven directly to Prague. It was a tense drive with little said. Eventually Prague came into view.

Once in the capital, Dubcek was informed that he had been expelled from the Czechoslovak Communist Party. It was no more than he expected although why he had been brought to Prague to be given the news he did not know. Puzzled but undaunted, he went home to Bratislava. Anna was still in Ankara and would remain there, harassed and bullied by Czech officials, for another month. For the moment there was nothing he could do about it.

Only negative publicity in foreign newspapers finally persuaded Husak to allow Anna back into Czechoslovakia. The experience had not helped her health but, like her husband, Anna Dubcek was a defiant personality with an unshakeable resolve and if Husak thought that the enforced exile had broken her—or her husband—he was very much mistaken.

Out of the Party and out of power, Alexander Dubcek's first priority was to find himself a job. However, he soon found that despite a chronic labour shortage in the country, there was to be no job for him. It was an embargo that was firmly applied by the government. The ubiquitous 'they' would decide if and when Dubcek could work again. The power of Husak and his cronies shocked Dubcek but he was just one of hundreds, maybe even thousands, trying to find employment after being purged from their previous, high-profile jobs in teaching, journalism and academe. Dubcek had always been good

with his hands and had no problems in considering manual work, a far cry from his time in power. The problem was that he was just not being allowed to use his skills.

Like so many other victims of Husak's purges, he was considered a high-risk counter-revolutionary. As such he was dangerous to the regime and needed to be kept in his place, made to see where control rested. He spent his days doing odd jobs round the house, things that had needed attention for years. It was necessary work but hardly fulfilling.

The situation lasted until October 1970 when he was summoned to appear before the First Secretary of the Slovak Communist Party. The news was simple: the Party was now prepared to choose a job for him. Within the next few weeks he was offered three jobs but turned all of them down as they were too far away from home and would involve several hours' commuting. The excuse was accepted and eventually Dubcek was offered a post as mechanic in the Forestry Commission just outside Bratislava. He was to be responsible for the maintenance of machinery, everything from bulldozers and diggers to chainsaws and welding equipment. The work base was close to home and naturally enough he took the job.







Prague during the Velvet Revolution, 1989. (cs:ŠJů)

His employers and work colleagues were, to begin with, more than supportive and accepted his famous face among their ranks. Then the pressure came. Police surveillance increased and inevitably affected his relationship with his colleagues. For several years an unmarked police car was stationed outside his house and anyone coming to visit him or the family was usually stopped and harangued. He was followed to and from work and anyone who spoke to him on the trolley car was questioned and sometimes threatened with the loss of their jobs if they ever spoke to him again.

If there was one good thing to come out of the situation it was simply that Alexander Dubcek never lost his sense of humour. Once, when the tailing police car came too close, he knocked on the window and suggested that it would be easier for everyone if they stopped following him and just gave him a lift to work. The policemen saw the funny side of it, laughed with him but said that such a thing would never be permitted by their superiors.*

Dubcek was not allowed to receive mail from abroad. Any letters addressed to him were simply intercepted by the authorities so that organizations in the West which had written, inviting him to visit, received not just short shift but a very cold and distant shoulder. Dubcek put up with it all; he made regular formal complaints about his treatment, all the while knowing that he would receive no answer.

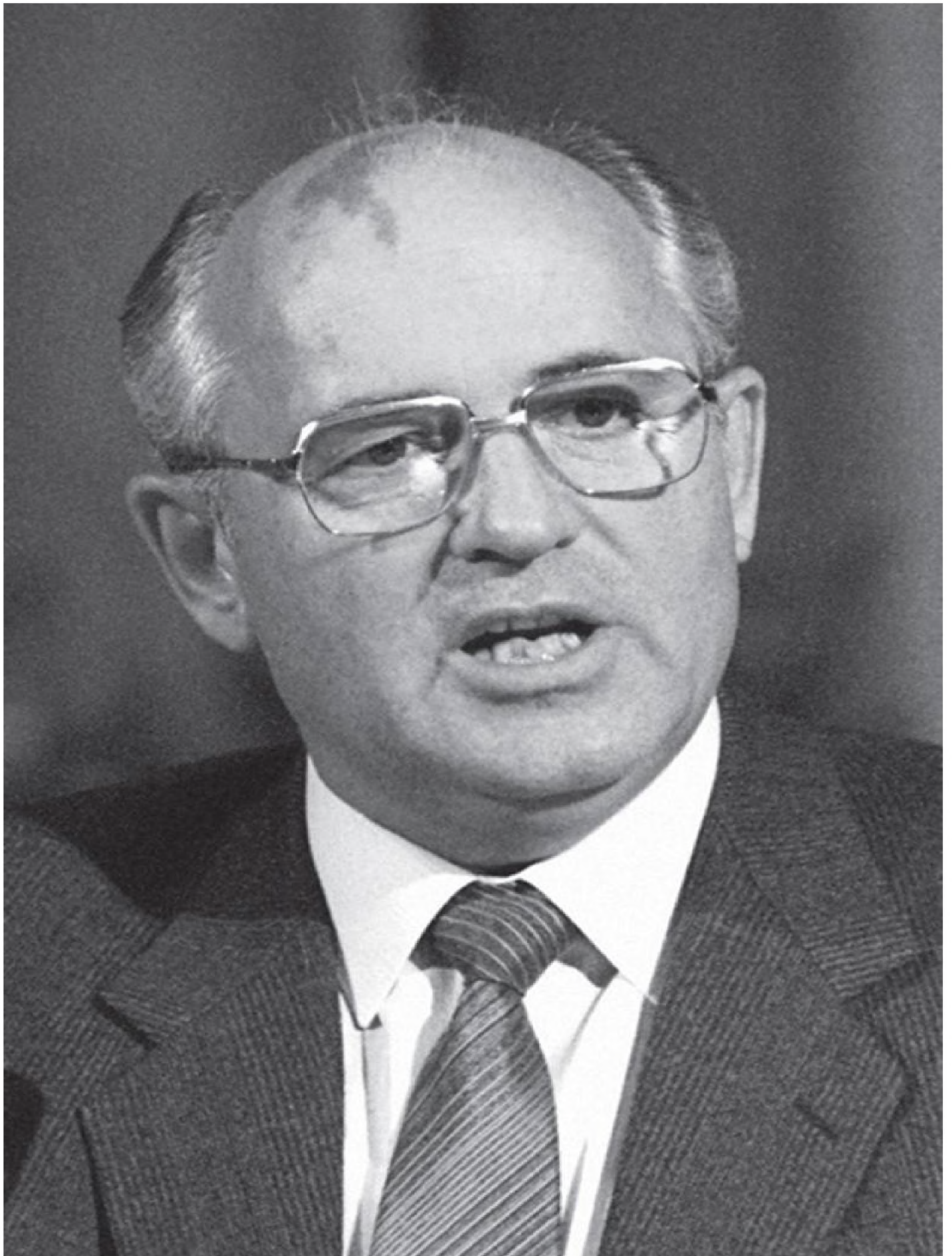
The watching police were a constant thorn in his side. They even followed him on his summer breaks at the family cottage in Senec. Once, when he and his friend and ally Vaclav Slavik were swimming in the lake—the only truly private place they could find, or so they thought—the police commandeered a rowing boat in order to stay close. One thing Dubcek knew—and told them—the police rowers would get tired before he did.

Unlike so many of his ‘fallen’ comrades, Dubcek was allowed to keep his telephone. Indeed, he was even given a brand-new device which, for the time, was an almost spaceage gadget. Only after a few weeks did he realize that it was bugged. The same thing happened with a new television set that he was given. There must have been dozens of these bugging devices in his house.

The persecution continued for many years and did not stop at Dubcek. His wife was seriously affected, her medical condition made worse by the constant harassment. Often treatments were cancelled without good cause and by the 1980s, it was proving almost impossible for her to receive anything like decent treatment for her gall bladder problems.

The Czech people were oppressed but they did not give up fighting. The youth of the country were, as they had been since the start of the Prague Spring, at the forefront of the fight. There were marches—with the inevitable consequences—and culture continued to thrive. Much of it centred on the rock band, The Plastic People of the Universe.

Husak’s regime had revoked the band’s professional music licence in 1970, effectively prohibiting them from performing. All that achieved was to force the band, along with many more of the cultural influences of the country, underground. The Plastic People of the Universe continued to perform at secret locations, even in Vaclav Havel’s own home town, and thousands turned up to hear them. That was a protest in itself. A whole protest movement gathered around The Plastic People and when, in 1974, the band organized and led the First Music Festival of the Second Culture (the First Culture was, the band explained, the totalitarian regime) it was too big an event to keep quiet. The secret police swooped, dozens were arrested and rioting broke out. At the subsequent trial two members of the band were sentenced to prison terms and former lead singer, Canadian Paul Wilson, was deported, even though he had left the group two years before. The Plastic People had acquired martyrdom status.



Mikhail Gorbachev, despite his KGB connections, was the Soviet architect of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. (Yuryi Abramochkin / RIA Novosti)

The trial saw twenty-seven people, many of them musicians, convicted but its real significance was its effect on people like the writer Vaclav Havel. It was not the only influence on the literati of the country, but together with many other writers and artists, the trial propelled Havel into direct action. He and his friends now produced Charter 77, a critical appraisal of the government, in particular its failure to implement human rights.

The charter has since achieved cult status, both within Czechoslovakia and in the wider world, but at the time very few people actually read it. At its height only 1,065 ever signed the document and the majority of Czechs only knew of it because of the government opposition. Nevertheless, its real significance was the fact that it existed at all, symbolizing as it did opposition to Soviet influence on the country. The charter became a focal point, a rallying point for liberal minds and many of the leading members, notably Vaclav Havel, went on to fill important positions after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 saw the demise of Soviet-based control.*



Leonid Brezhnev died in November 1982. With him went the whole of the Brezhnev era as events like the rise of Solidarity in Poland symbolized the embryonic breakdown of the Soviet system. Mikhail Gorbachev, despite his KGB connections, was the architect of *glasnost* and *perestroika* that soon reached Czechoslovakia, the epitome of the dictatorial systems that Gorbachev was trying to reform. Much of what *perestroika* brought to the Eastern Bloc was very similar to what Dubcek's reforms of the Prague Spring had sought to achieve. A joke that was heard on the streets of Prague at the time was both compelling and true: "What's the difference between Gorbachev and Dubcek? Twenty years."

Gustav Husak found himself under increasing pressure as reforms in the other Soviet satellite states left Czechoslovakia isolated and abandoned. Conditions in the country, in particular in public health services and the general environment within which people lived, had deteriorated so badly that it was clear that the regime was on its last legs.

In December 1987 Husak was replaced as First Secretary by Milos Jakes, a nonentity whose appointment confirmed that if Czechoslovakia was not yet dead in the water as a Soviet-controlled satellite then its eventual sinking was just months away. Husak retained his position as president, another sign of the chaos that reigned in the country.

While Dubcek was still being shadowed, the oversight was much less severe than before. He was now able to visit friends in Prague and was not worried when casual passers-by chose to shake his hand. In May 1988 he received a letter telling him that the University of Bologna had awarded him an honorary degree. Still dazed by the fact that he had actually received the letter, Dubcek applied for a passport and visa to leave the country. He was even more amazed when he received them. His visit was a huge success, crowds everywhere cheering him as he visited Italian socialist and communist leaders. He was even received at the Vatican where he was welcomed by Pope John Paul II.

After he returned to Czechoslovakia, there were further invitations from Spain and France. This time, however, the regime refused his application: old attitudes had not totally withered away, it seemed. However, Vaclav Havel—who had been arrested for placing flowers on the spot where Jan Palach had set fire to himself—was released from prison and Dubcek immediately went to visit him in Prague. It was a joyous evening for both men who were even able to make an international call to an exiled friend in Austria.

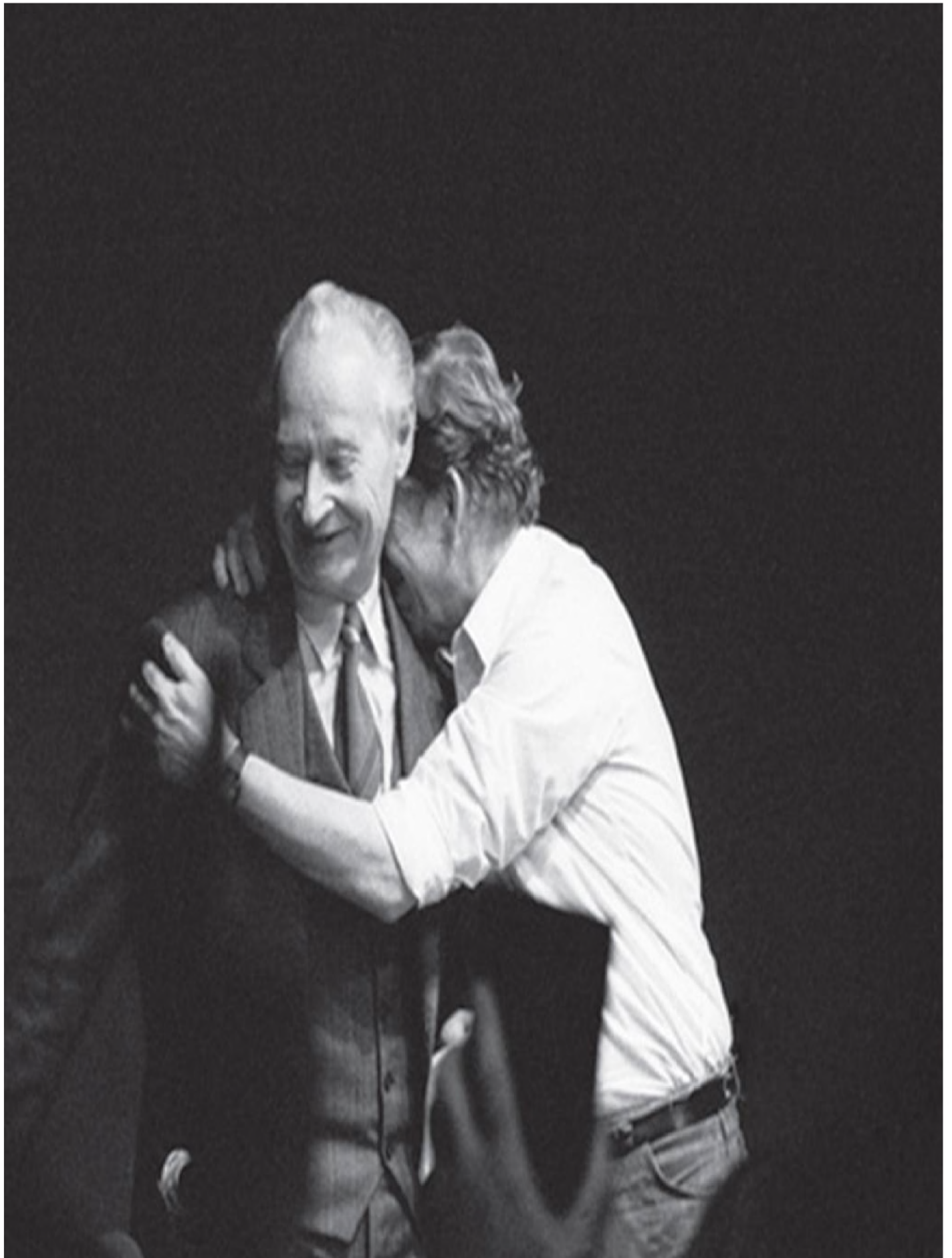
The collapse of the Soviet Union took place in the autumn of 1989. The Soviets seemed to have lost interest in countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia and when the

regime in East Germany came tumbling down, it was obvious to everyone that Czechoslovakia would not be long in following the German example.

On 17 November 1989 a march to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi assault on Czech universities developed into a mass outpouring of public emotion. Riot police attacked the students and Dubcek, who happened to be in Prague that day, was immediately surrounded and taken to a local police station where he was held for several hours before being reluctantly released.

The initial march quickly led to a series of demonstrations across the country. In Prague alone the number of people taking part reached nearly a million. Public pressure forced the government to rethink its policies and the newly formed Civic Forum, a loose alliance of independent organizations, went into discussions with Jakes and Husak. Non-violent transfer of power from the hands of the demigods was soon agreed.

On 26 November Alexander Dubcek and Vaclav Havel appeared side by side on the balcony of the Melantrich Publishing House in Wenceslas Square. The photograph was immediately flashed around the world. More importantly, their appearance together produced an enormous roar from the several-hundred-thousand-strong crowd. Havel and Dubcek standing together before the crowd was more than just a gesture. It symbolized the alliance of the Czech and Slovak nations, united in defiance of the Soviet Union and the regime within the country. It was an enormously powerful and emotive moment, one that neither man would ever forget. It was the final, the ultimate success of the Prague Spring.



Vaclav Havel embraces Alexander Dubcek at a meeting in the Laterna Magika theatre in Prague, 24 November 1989. That same night the entire leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party resigned. (Jaroslav Kucera)

* Dubcek, p. 257.

* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charter_77

CONCLUSION

Czechoslovakia was not finished with Alexander Dubcek. After the fall of Husak, he served as chairman of the Federal Assembly from December 1989 until June 1992. Under the new constitution this was one of the three most important posts and one that he more than adequately filled. As chair of the Federal Assembly he oversaw the removal of the communists, including Gustav Husak, from key offices. Arguably, his crowning achievement was, on 29 December, the election of Vaclav Havel as president. It was certainly a far cry from servicing and maintaining vehicles for the Forestry Commission.

In 1992 Dubcek, always a Slovak at heart, was elected leader of the Slovak Democratic Party. It did not hurt or damage his love of Czechoslovakia and to the end of his days he worked tirelessly to create a true federation between his two countries, the one of his birth and the adopted one with which his name will always be associated.

Under Dubcek's leadership full democracy came to the country, along with freedom of the press and of religion. The treaty that had legalized the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was also abrogated. The Prague Spring had finally come of age.

As chairman of the Federal Assembly Dubcek visited many foreign states and received and statesmen from countries as diverse as the US, Britain, Japan and Turkey. As an adviser to Havel, his knowledge and experience were invaluable in the early stages of Czech freedom. He might not have approved of the gradual 'move to the Right' in Czech politics but Alexander Dubcek always believed in justice and the right of the people to make their own decisions. He never lost his belief in social justice for all.

After the heartbreak of the Prague Spring and its failure—its temporary failure as it turned out—it would be nice to say that Alexander Dubcek lived out a long and contented life, glorying in the sunlight of a new Prague Spring. It was not to be. He continued to work long and punishing hours, far longer than any man of almost 70 should even contemplate. The stresses must have been enormous, not only for him but also for his family.

In September 1991 his wife Anna died. She had struggled with poor health for many years, poor health that had hardly been improved by her treatment at the hands of the communist regime. Dubcek never apportioned blame but he was never the same man

without her. Anna had been his rock, his constant companion and now to suddenly find himself without her was almost unbearable.

On 1 September 1992 Dubcek was involved in a fatal car accident on the main road to Humpolec. He did not die on the spot but lingered for nine weeks after the crash, finally breathing his last on 7 November 1992. He was 70 years old. He was buried in Bratislava. Only after his death did the doctors discover that he was suffering from a broken spine. He also had pneumonia (probably caught after falling into an exhausted sleep below an open window), stomach ulcers and an inflamed pancreas.



If 1968 was a seminal year for the world it was also a crucial one for Alexander Dubcek. The year saw the creation and then the crushing of the Prague Spring, a movement and a process that he had taken to his soul. Reform to the extent that occurred in Czechoslovakia under his rule had not always been his intention but once into the process he was, like many converts, taken over, even obsessed, by the opportunities he saw: “At first Dubcek was reluctant to embrace radical reform but once persuaded of the need to liberalize and democratize the communist system he became one of ‘liberal’ or ‘progressive’ socialism’s staunchest and most enthusiastic supporters.”*

To the end Dubcek never regretted his actions during the Prague Spring. He did, however, admit to a degree of naivety, believing that the Soviet Union would be prepared to look the other way as long as he did not attempt to take Czechoslovakia out of the Eastern Bloc and the Warsaw Pact. He should, perhaps, have been more aware of the old Soviet cartoon that shows two women skiing. “Look over there,” says one woman, “our neighbour has taken up skiing so that we’ll never be out of her sight.”



Alexander Dubcek's grave in Bratislava. (Sculptor Teodor Baník, photographer Kelovy)

Perhaps his greatest mistake was to believe the lies that Brezhnev and the Politburo spouted so glibly. Only hindsight showed him that the people he was dealing with had no more morals than the sewer rats beneath their fine Moscow and Leningrad buildings. Only with hindsight did he see the totalitarian nature of the Brezhnev regime. For that he can be blamed but he can never be condemned.

* Heinemann in *Europe-Asia Studies*.

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(Rob Bogaerts / Anefo)

Acknowledgements

Trudy, my love, memories of our first visit to Prague—long after the Prague Spring.

Chris Cocks, my editor at Pen and Sword, whose help and support are invaluable.

My sons Andrew and Douglas for many late night conversations and arguments around socialism in the 1960s.

All of the people who spoke to me about their memories of the Prague Spring.

A particular thank-you to the editors of the ‘local-life’ website for putting me in touch with so many fascinating people.

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